

Tamaki Itomori

Illustration by
Izumi

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CHRONICLES OF THE
HIDDEN WORLD

HOW I BECAME A DOCTOR FOR THE GODS





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Illustration by **Izumi**


New York

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Tamaki Itomori

Translation by Luke Hutton

Cover art by Izumi

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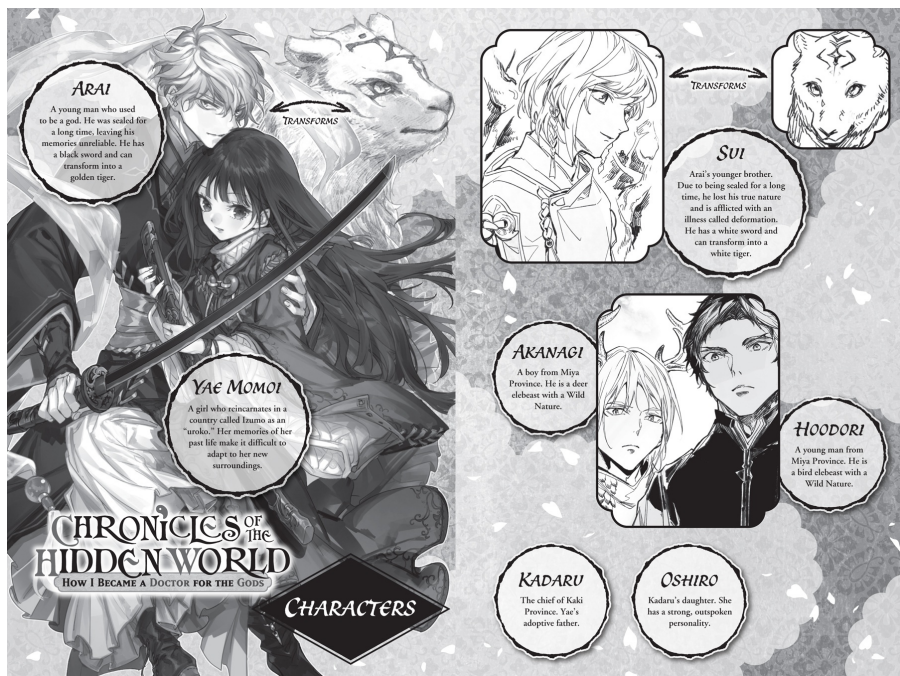
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Afterword



ARAI

A young man who used to be a god. He was sealed for a long time, leaving his memories unreliable. He has a black sword and can transform into a golden tiger.

TRANSFORMS

YAE MOMOI

A girl who reincarnates in a country called Inano as an "uruko." Her memories of her past life make it difficult to adapt to her new surroundings.

CHRONICLES OF THE HIDDEN WORLD

HOW I BECAME A DOCTOR FOR THE GODS

CHARACTERS

TRANSFORMS

SUI

Arai's younger brother. Due to being sealed for a long time, he lost his true nature and is afflicted with an illness called deformation. He has a white sword and can transform into a white tiger.

AKANAGI

A boy from Miya Province. He is a deer elebeast with a Wild Nature.

HOODORI

A young man from Miya Province. He is a bird elebeast with a Wild Nature.

KADARU

The chief of Kaki Province. Yae's adoptive father.

OSHIRO

Kadaru's daughter. She has a strong, outspoken personality.

I A Fairy Tale of Birth After Life

Yae Momoi had memories of a previous life. Though she was a little unsure if she should think of them that way.

Yae once lived in a small town on the island of Shikoku in Japan. She moved to Tokyo in her late teens to go to university but ended up returning home after graduation. She worked for a steady company that dealt with cartographic information. Yae landed her position thanks to her part-time job studying the production of maps while she was a student. Fortunately for her, there happened to be an affiliate company located in her hometown, and the parent company offered to let her continue working for them there if she planned on returning home. Taking advantage of their kind offer, she did just that.

Yae's job involved endlessly walking through street after street, visiting house after house, with a handwritten map in one hand as she conducted surveys of the area. It was during this kind of soulless, mundane work—she suspected—that she had gotten caught up in some sort of accident and died...but it could have been something else entirely. Her memories of the end were foggy, and she wasn't entirely sure of what had happened.

It could have been an illness. It could have been death from overwork... That would have been a rough way to go. Trying to pinpoint exactly how she'd died was distressing, so Yae decided not to think too hard about it. Regardless of how it happened, she woke up one day to find herself reborn in this world.

Because her memories were more than mere fragments, because they were so vivid, it didn't really feel to Yae like she had been reborn. It felt more like she remained the same Yae Momoi while only her body regressed to that of a three- or four-year-old toddler.

People born in this way were called uroko. The word roughly meant a "child who took a detour" and originated from the idea that the person's previous life was a detour before they returned to this world. As far as Yae understood it, uroko were people reincarnated from Japan.

Some of this world's old literature spelled uroko with different characters meaning "hollow" and "child." This was because children born in this way appeared within a tree hollow, as if the tree was giving them a motherly embrace.

Being reborn was rare in this world but not unusual. It was slightly less common than the percentage of people born left-handed in her previous world, which was about 10 percent of the total population. The proper word used for the birth of an uroko was an *awakening*.

There were many other people who had awoken in the hollow of a tree just like Yae. In most cases, however, memories of their previous lives grew hazy with time. They naturally fell away as the soul grew accustomed to the laws of the new world, since they were unnecessary for life here. Despite this, ten years after her awakening, Yae still retained her old memories.

When comparing her current life to her previous one, she often wondered if Izumo—the country where she lived now—was Japan from the distant past or one possibility for its distant future. It was as if civilization had collapsed through repeated progression and regression, changing the shape of countries in the process. Even the place of people and animals in the world defied all her previous understanding. People, beasts, and their respective paths had been thrown into disarray by the merciless hand of fate.

That was how Yae thought of this strange world where the spectacular was ordinary.

It took a while after her rebirth to be able to calm down and accept this world with a level head. The period immediately after she was born was especially difficult and panic-inducing.

The day of her awakening, she awoke from what she thought was a nap to find herself curled up like a fetus inside the hollow of an old tree. Feeling anxious, she left the tree and was shocked by what she saw.

"Where am I?" she muttered, before noticing her hands and growing even more aghast. "Huh? Are these *my* hands?" A pronounced fear was audible in her words.

Her limbs had shrunk considerably. Her hands were clearly those of an infant. Instead of the camisole and underpants she wore to bed for pajamas, she was wearing a soft, semi-transparent cloth that felt like it was made of chiffon.

"Huh?!" Yae cried out, overwhelmed. Even her voice sounded like that of a small child. *What's happening? Is this a dream?* In the midst of her panic, a part of her understood that her soul had been properly reborn in this world.

If she had been aware of only one of her two lives, she might have been able to accept the new world more quickly. With both jumbled inside her head, however, her original thoughts and memories had much greater pull. It was natural that the consciousness of a twenty-four-year-old woman would be stronger than that of a newborn baby.

Yae was instantly consumed by fear, and she left the tree to seek help. That turned out to be a mistake. If she had remained there rather than wandering about indiscriminately, someone with a developed sense of smell would have perceived the awakening of Yae's spirit and come to get her. But the unsteadiness she felt in her newly child-sized limbs drove all ability to reason out of her brain. *I'm having trouble running. What happened to my body? Where should I go? How do I get back home?*

Confused and running all around the area, deep in the mountains, it took no time at all before Yae began to gasp from exhaustion. She was a helpless toddler, after all. There was no way she was going to have the stamina to hike through a mountain pass without any gear. Her feet were in agony. She wrapped leaves around them to alleviate the pain, but the sight of her primitive state caused tears well up.

"I'm going to die..." Yae muttered. She spent the rest of that day in a miserable cycle of crying, fainting, waking up, walking, fainting, and crying some more.

The next morning, she woke to the sound of squirrels the size of cats dashing around her head, and the realization that she really was going to die finally set in. The harshness of her hunger outweighed her fear. The desperate need to quell her starvation ruled her mind.

Won't someone come to save me? she thought hazily. *I'm just a helpless child. What has the world come to that a little girl can be left to cry herself to death in a dark mountain forest? Will no kind stranger suddenly appear and save me?*

"I'm hungry. I'm going to die..."

The bottoms of her feet were bleeding, and the pain was too great for her to stand. After some time of practically rolling down a gentle slope, Yae caught a whiff of a pleasant scent. It smelled sweet and a little sour, like a fruit. In reality, it was a rotten sweetness, but her all-consuming hunger easily pushed aside whatever meager sense of danger she felt.

She desperately crawled in the direction of the scent until she found a pomegranate tree with twisting branches... At least, Yae decided to see them as pomegranates.

The area was densely wooded with these trees, but strangely, she didn't hear any insects or birds. Also, the pomegranate trees looked like shrubbery compared to the surrounding older forest; or rather, all the other trees were simply humongous. This gave the whole place the

darkness of twilight even in the middle of the day, but the far end of the pomegranate patch was sunk in an even eerier blackness.

Yae's life was in critical danger, but even so, she couldn't will herself to enter the patch. She sidled up to a shorter tree at the edge nearest her. Her arms and legs were muddy, and she had many small scratches.

There was a tremendously thick pillar, sooty crimson in color, stuck into the ground at an angle next to the tree. It looked as if a giant had thrown a lance down from the sky.

Yae picked up a rock off the ground, aimed for one of the pomegranates on the tree, and threw it. Reaching the fruit would have been a piece of cake as a fully grown woman, but with her unreliable and weak toddler's body, she couldn't even reach the lowest branch no matter how hard she tried. She threw rock after rock, and by the time her arms had started to grow numb, she finally succeeded at knocking down one pomegranate. She picked it up carefully and began to cry.

"I'll starve if I don't eat anything... But...this looks like it's going to kill me..." The fruit was clearly dangerous to eat. Yae could see nothing but writhing pain in her future if she bit into it. She was convinced it was unsafe. "This is a life-and-death decision. How did I end up in this situation...?"

The skin peeled easily because it's ripe, not because it's rotten. The seeds on the inside only look black because it's dark outside, and the hard white beads are just my imagination. I can eat this. It won't hurt me. It's just food. Here we go... Yae's hunger-impaired thinking and her body's pressing demand for nutrition forced her mouth open.

It was disgusting. It tasted rotten. But Yae still ate it. She had only one reason.

I want to live.

There were some very hard bead-like things inside it that might have been seeds, and she swallowed those as well. She couldn't stop herself from eating. Her desire to live made her temporarily lose her mind.

I want to live, no matter what it takes...

She didn't want to die again. The thought of her heart, her soul disappearing into nothingness as if slipping into sleep terrified her. She wanted to live. Her blood boiled and her body screamed with that desire.

Yae let her tears fall as she ravenously consumed the fruit. At some point, she realized she could have a much bigger problem than it being rotten—*What if it's poisonous?* Just as she finally registered that cruel possibility, her consciousness began to fade. *Oh, this is the end. I'm truly dying.*

By the time she opened her eyes next, someone had rescued her.



“Dr. Yae, do you have a second?”

Yae heard a voice from behind her just as she was about to perform an Appellation charm on what was called a Japanese andromeda in her previous life. She hadn’t dipped her brush in the inkpot yet, so she rolled it up in a cloth and returned it to a light-brown leather bag hanging from the sash around her waist. “Of course,” she said with a smile.

It was Misao, son of Kadaru, the chief of Kaki Province. He was a large man at over six *shaku*—about one hundred and ninety centimeters—and his big red eyes suggested a childlike nature more timid than cheerful.

It was currently the beginning of summer, in the fifth month of the lunar calendar. Misao’s clothes were thin to fit the season. The basic form of dress didn’t differ between men and women, consisting of a long round-necked robe, a sash, pants, and leather shoes. As such, Yae and Misao were dressed similarly. She wore an indigo robe with a sash of white fabric over it, and her collar and cuffs were decorated with a vine pattern. Misao’s light-green robe had delicate embroidery, and the waist was tied together with a yellow sash. It was a combination that reflected youth and brought to mind the scent of fresh greenery.

“Sorry for interrupting your work, Dr. Yae,” he apologized.

“I don’t mind. I was just thinking of taking a break,” Yae said with a shake of her head. Misao smiled softly as if to gauge her mood and scratched his short reddish-brown hair.

It always made Yae feel strange when people from Kaki Province called her “doctor.” Ignoring her age in her previous life, Yae currently had the body of a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old girl. Misao was young himself, but he was still in his mid-twenties.

“I have a message from Father,” Misao said. “He would like you to perform the Kaizaka March tomorrow night.”

“Ah... It’s already been a year. Understood. Please tell Chief Kadaru that I will start preparing right away,” Yae responded, turning away from Misao and gazing off into the distance.

Misao smiled with relief but then immediately winced. “Uh, Dr. Yae...,” he started nervously, looking behind Yae with an anxious expression. “Lord Kuroashi is back. He’s right behind you.”

Yae turned around to see a giant tiger sitting behind her as if he

had just appeared out of thin air. Kuroashi had pitch-black fur as if formed from the depths of the night. His eyes were bright yellow like sunflowers or dandelions, and surrounded by his black fur, they looked like two full moons resting in the night sky.

“Lord Kuroashi can’t get enough of me. I’m always looking up to find him by my side,” Yae said teasingly, giving the tiger a pat on the head. Kuroashi scrunched his nose and glared at her with great irritation. This tiger couldn’t take a joke.

She tugged Kuroashi’s ears and teased him for his sullenness, and Misao’s expression turned serious. “Demon beasts really do like you, Dr. Yae. So much so that I’m worried one is going to gobble up your soul like candy someday. I suppose I have no right to say that, though, given how long we’ve made you sacrifice yourself for the ceremonies...”

Misao left hastily after relaying his message, and Yae decided to suspend her Appellation work and return home. Kuroashi followed behind her without hesitation. Yae glanced at the tiger and then turned toward the mountains, their ridgelines like raging waves in the distant sky. The haze hanging over the summits looked like a white dragon taking a nap with its body wound around the peaks. It was a beautiful, otherworldly sight.

Kaki Province, where Yae lived, was a village situated in a small basin within a valley of Mount Yagi, one of the peaks in the Hachimi Mountains. Yae looked ahead and saw beautiful green terraced fields blanketing the slope of Mount Yagi. Red azaleas and yellow buttercups bloomed between them.

There were crops planted at the bottom of the windy basin as well, their trenches receiving water from a river that curved through the land like a snake. Houses were built here and there between the fields. The sight of countless terraces winding their way down the slope of the mountain was one of the defining characteristics of Kaki Province, which made up the southern region of Izumo.

Izumo was called a country, but its scale was about equivalent to a prefecture in Japan, and a province was essentially a prefectural town or village. The population of Kaki Province was only about five thousand.

Other countries were located outside of Izumo. Each one had a ruler called a Great Protector who governed autonomously, and the chiefs of each province ranked below them. But it was the household of the chief of each province who actually protected the villagers. They repelled invaders from other lands seeking territory and resources, fought off pirates who attacked settlements, defended people against damage from natural disasters, and held a number of

ceremonies to purify evil spirits that arose throughout the land. These included rituals to calm fallen gods that spread misfortune.

The Kaizaka March that Misao had mentioned earlier was one of those ceremonies. The ritual was performed by marching around with a paper lantern at a set location. It sounded simple when put into words, but it was much more complicated than that.

The Kaizaka March is far and away the scariest ceremony I've been asked to perform.

Ceremonies were not just limited to Kaki Province—they were held frequently in other lands as well. Now that she thought about it, they had similarities to the many festivals held throughout Japan, but they were very different in nature. You weren't going to see anything fun like night stalls or fireworks at a ceremony in Kaki Province.

"Lord Kuroashi, do you know the origins of the Kaizaka March? All I know is that it's a ritual to soothe a fallen god," Yae said, looking down at Kuroashi as she plucked loquat fruits from a tree she found along the road.

Kuroashi was a beast who Yae had encountered many years ago when she performed the Kaizaka March for the first time. She wasn't sure of the reason, but ever since then, he appeared at unexpected times and hung around her.

Even after nearly a decade, she was unsure if he was a simple spirit, a divine beast...or maybe even some kind of divine messenger. That reminded her, when she first met him, he was enshrouded in an eerie and scary aura reminiscent of a monster. That aura had thinned gradually over the years, and it felt like he had regained his sense of reason as it did so.

"I wish you could speak, Lord Kuroashi... We get along so well now, it's a shame I can't know what you're thinking," Yae said regretfully, holding down her long hair as it blew about in the wind. It kept flapping in her face, and she regretted not tying it back with a cord.

Yae's black hair extended down to her waist. The moisture in the air on rainy days caused it to swell, and dry weather made it expand like a clump of seaweed; it was a real pain. She often wished she could tell her hair to just chill out.

"I want to talk with you, Lord Kuroashi. Do you want to spend some time practicing the human tongue?" she asked with an encouraging smile and raised fists, but Kuroashi just looked at her coldly.

This large tiger was very intelligent, even by human standards. He clearly understood Yae's words even without being able to speak.

"Oh, come on... That's the look of a tiger who wouldn't want to speak to me even if he could. I'm offended... You should be nicer to

me.” She continued to speak fruitlessly to the indifferent Kuroashi until she arrived at her house.

Yae’s home was located in the middle of a terraced field. The outside was a whiskey bottle that was covered in vines and moss. That wasn’t some metaphor—it was literally a bottle from a famous Japanese whiskey brand enlarged to the size of a house. The bottle was an elongated oval shape with a flat silhouette. Yae had enjoyed this whiskey on occasion in her previous life. Her favorite snacks to eat with it were vegetable sticks and blue cheese. Cheese and beer existed in this world as well, but they tasted very different from how Yae remembered them.

What a fantastical sight..., she thought, admiring it. But she also felt a faint loneliness. Yae was still much more familiar with her previous world and the things in it. That feeling hadn’t faded at all. *This world isn’t necessarily in an entirely different dimension, though.*

Yae guessed that this world was either Japan’s ancient past or one of its possible distant futures, and that conjecture was directly related to this kind of fantastical sight. Items like beer bottles, eating utensils, cars, power poles, and other everyday objects from her previous world could be found abandoned all throughout the land of Kaki Province. The people of this world called these items mysteriums.

Most mysteriums had been enlarged to the size of dinosaurs. Some items saw a bigger change in size than others, and the laws that determined the degree to which they grew were unclear. Kaki Province was said to have an especially large amount of mysteriums. As a result, some people, especially those born as uroko like Yae, would gladly use mysteriums that were empty on the inside as homes or storehouses. It was quite convenient. The majority of mysteriums were familiar items from their past lives, so uroko weren’t wary of them like other people were. Yae had never been outside of Izumo, but she figured these kinds of relics could be found everywhere.

But suddenly, a thought occurred to Yae that ran contrary to her theory about a past or future Japan. Maybe this *was* a totally different dimension, but just like how oceans and rivers carried illegally dumped trash to faraway places, things from Japan occasionally crossed a barrier and ended up flowing here. That wasn’t impossible.

It doesn’t really matter which is true... I can’t return to my original world anyway. No matter how much she missed it, she had accepted that she would never be able to return. She understood that in her heart. Yae sighed deeply, and Kuroashi looked up at her with a dubious expression.

The “Whiskey House” Yae had chosen for her home was made of glass, and a large portion of the bottle’s neck was missing. The top half of it was wrapped in dense vines. The body of the bottle was

covered in cracks, and small scratches accumulated with the passage of time, creating a white cloudiness that made it impossible to see through from the outside. She didn't have to worry about the bottle breaking, either—growing to this size had naturally made it thicker, giving it the impact resistance of tempered glass. And she had packed the missing portion of the neck with building stones.

Yae entered the house. She had fitted out a part where there was a hole and installed a wooden door there. The interior was long and elliptical, just like the shape of the bottle. She had about thirty-three square meters of space.

The loosely curving wall was covered with handmade tiles. She had wooden shelves and a dresser. She had put boards across the floor to make it flat. Thick fabrics were spread out on the floor in the center, on top of which was a crescent-shaped hammock that she used as her bed.

Through a folding door on the left side of the house was a stove and a small water well with a hand pump. She had removed the glass on the bottom of the bottle before placing boards over that part of the floor, so it was a level lower than her living space. Her privy and bathroom were located farther back on the other side, behind a partition.

Kuroashi walked in as if he owned the place and sprawled out on a floor cushion Yae had finished knitting the other day.

“Wait, Lord Kuroashi. We need to clean the mud off your paws.”

Yae grabbed a towel from a wooden shelf along the wall, held up one of Kuroashi's front paws despite his annoyance, and began to wipe the mud off. His paws were fascinating to the touch, at once hard and soft. She couldn't help but poke the padding casually, and Kuroashi responded in irritation by whacking her on the arm with his free front leg.

“Come on, I'm exhausted. Surely, I deserve a little animal therapy? I skipped lunch at work today,” Yae complained, sounding like her abusive boss from her previous life. That reminded her that she was hungry, and she decided to prepare an early dinner. “Oh, shoot. I'm out of eggs and sausage.”

Yae opened the folding door to check the storage closet next to her stove and grimaced. Kuroashi followed and peered in from beside her. The closet was installed under the floor, enabling it to serve as a refrigerator.

Yae grumbled as she put the loquat fruits she'd picked on the way home into the closet. “Living without electricity and gas is really hard...”

She had three round, paperweight-like quartz pieces in the closet that had been cooled to prevent the food from rotting. They only

remained effective for a few days, so she would need to pay to have them cooled again... That was a pain she could deal with tomorrow.

"I need to go shopping. Let's go together, Lord Kuroashi!" she said, giving him a friendly smile in the hopes that he would carry her bag. The tiger gave her a suspicious look but followed her obediently.

"I'm not asking for luxury, but a twenty-four seven convenience store, a supermarket, and a pharmacy would be really nice. I'd kill for some household appliances, too... And will someone please hurry up and invent the bicycle? Ah, but minerals are really precious here... I don't think improved technological skill would be enough," Yae grumbled, voicing desires that were nothing if not luxurious. She grabbed an empty basket and went out once again with Kuroashi in tow.

This world also used currency in addition to barter. Yae earned money from her ceremonial duties and from selling hand-knitted fabrics and embroidery, and she felt she made a decent living. There wasn't a supermarket where you could buy anything under the sun, but there were merchants, and it was common to buy food and daily necessities from them. Eggs and produce were typically bought directly from the people who produced them.

Yae's first destination was a row house set up for peddlers below a terraced field. Merchants from out of town came here during the day to palm off wares packed into draining baskets and barrels. Their shops looked a little like street stalls.

She looked around and saw people here and there eyeing the goods along the row house. They were all startled when they noticed Yae with Kuroashi following behind her. The first to speak to her was a rice dealer she had become acquainted with. "Dr. Yae, I see you brought Lord Kuroashi with you again."

"He's just my bodyguard," Yae responded lazily. The rice dealer laughed awkwardly. "Three bowls of rice, please."

Rice was measured by the bowl in this world rather than by cups like in Japan. One bowl was equivalent to two cups, or about three hundred grams. That would last for three or four days if she had rice at breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

"Coming right up," the merchant said. He climbed a ladder and used a ladle to scoop rice out of a giant barrel. The barrel wasn't a mystery, but it was very big, about the size of a grown man.

These barrels had been set all along the row house. The next merchant over carried wheat, and the next, alcohol. Yae decided to buy wheat next. People ate bread much more often than rice in this world. She walked up to the wheat merchant and used her fingers to signal for five bowls. The merchant grinned affirmatively.

"I have eggs, fresh eggs! ...Dr. Yae, need any eggs?"

A large man who worked as an egg peddler walked by her. Perfect timing.

"I'll have six, please."

The egg peddler was unique in that he didn't have a shop—instead, he carried a large umbrella on his shoulder with the cloth removed and egg baskets hanging on the exposed ribs.

He usually gives me a freebie if I have Lord Kuroashi with me! Celebrating internally, Yae placed her now-heavy basket on Kuroashi's back and made a lap around the row house. She had gotten most of what she wanted, including meat and vegetables, so she started back home to the Whiskey House.

"Oh yeah, I'm almost out of soapberries," Yae muttered, stopping in the road. She used dried soapberries as soap. The fruits couldn't be picked in this season, so she would have to purchase some from a merchant. Or she could just use adzuki beans instead... "Really makes you appreciate the convenience of washing machines..."

People in this world had to live their lives in accordance with the seasons. There was always a job to do, whether it was tilling the fields, digging a well, taking care of livestock, or working at the loom.

"It sure makes you feel alive," Yae said to herself, overcome by a strange mood. Kuroashi nudged her in the knees gently with his head; that was probably a signal telling her to hurry home. The thought made her happy.



It was a moonlit night.

"Tsuuchi-ya, tsuchi-ya, ametsuchi-ya."

Yae sang as she marched along the dark path. She had a paper lantern in her right hand and a net bag full of loquat fruits in her left. They were the fruits she had picked along the road the previous day, and she had tied them all with hemp string.

"Maatsuro, matsuro, maatsuro-ya, chimata."

She was wearing a long white robe with a stand-up collar tied by a black sash and tubular white *tabi* on her feet. She wasn't wearing shoes—she wasn't allowed to.

"Maatsurya, matsurya, matsuri-ya, konkon."

Yae's hair fell past her shoulders untied. It was early summer, but her breath was visible as she sang as if it were freezing cold outside.

"Konkon, koko, kogo, goko, kokon."

She was walking among the countless spiraling terraced fields that were Kaki Province's most defining feature. Besides Yae, there wasn't

a single person outside. She heard no insects, and the wind was still. The disquieting atmosphere was intimidating, and she couldn't help but feel that there were things lurking in the darkness. It felt like she had wandered into an unfamiliar, unknown land. Or rather, that time and space had shifted slightly... The desire to escape this strange place as quickly as possible pressed upon her heart.

Yae distracted herself from her feelings of impatience and faint dread by focusing on taking one step at a time. She noticed Kuroashi walking beside her, unsure if he was there to keep watch or to protect her.

“Maatsuro, matsuro, matsuro-e, manima.”

As Yae walked through the terraced fields, the fallen god Lady Bihin walked ahead of her, holding a rusted sword. The upper half of her body was naked, and below, she was wearing a short, pleated skirt. She wasn't wearing shoes. Her body was concealed by thick miasma, and her appearance was only clearly visible when it thinned. She had growths that looked like human faces on the top of her head, chest, stomach, back, and both arms and legs, numbering eight in total. There were also smaller beast faces all over her body. Countless arms grew from her back to the left and right as if they were wings.



The Kaizaka March ceremony was performed to drive away a fallen god. It was first performed over a century ago, and Yae thought it was similar to *tsuina*, an exorcism rite performed in Japan to expel evil demons. It was held once a year, and a chant was performed to drive away the fallen god named Lady Bihin that appeared in Kaki Province to spread impurity. A fallen god was an evil spirit that brought harm to people and dried mountains and rivers.

There was no state religion in Kaki Province—or anywhere in the world, for that matter. You could say there was no concept of religion at all, but it was more complicated than that. People had faith in nature and in supernatural objects, but no one thought of it as religion. The world was brimming with supernatural phenomena that Yae would once have thought looked like magic or something out of a fairy tale. Divine power was one such example.

The standard of living was reminiscent of Japan before the spread of gas and electricity—it should have been equivalent to the Edo period. But this fantastical divine power was used in a variety of ways that allowed further advancement of civilization.

Even the most unnatural phenomena were accepted as regular occurrences. Lady Bihin was greatly feared by the populace, but no one denied her existence. And this was by no means limited to people such as psychics. Where there were mountains, there were valleys, and where there were people, there were spirits. It was thought of as a fact of life.

Lady Bihin left a trail of filth that looked like black oil as she passed over the land, which Yae purified by placing the tied loquat fruits onto branches of shrubbery along the path. Loquat fruits were much bigger in this world than in her last.

The Kaizaka March had many rules. You were not to sing when Lady Bihin turned around. You were not to move, either, or breathe. You were not to touch Lady Bihin. You were not to speak to her. You were not to look away for long while pursuing her. You were not to extinguish the light of the paper lantern until Lady Bihin finished her lap around the Kaki Province basin.

No one knew what happened when the envoy broke these rules. There was one reason for that—those who broke a rule all went missing the same night, never to return.

This fallen god didn't originally have a name, and people just called her the Fallen Lady. That was until many years ago when an uroko reborn in Kaki Province surmised that her name was Bihin.

Through some strange fate, the place Lady Bihin appeared was

near where Yae had devoured the seeds of the rotten pomegranate-like fruit shortly after her resurrection. If Yae had pushed herself to crawl just a little farther that day, she probably would have found Kaki Province.

Near that spot was a giant crimson pillar stuck into the ground. It was now too weathered for the text to be legible, but it was said that *Bihin*, spelled with kanji meaning “beautiful” and “bride,” was carved into the pillar.

The people of Kaki Province thought the characters on the pillar must be a name that showed the fallen god’s true nature. However, the script used for writing in everyday life in Kaki Province resembled the *jindai moji* characters some believed to have been used in ancient Japan, and no one could read kanji. Then one day, an uroko arrived who had retained the memories of their past life for longer than usual, and they deciphered the characters that had been a mystery for so long.

Given the meaning of the characters, there was no doubt the fallen god’s true form was that of a beautiful woman, but something had corrupted her and reduced her to this state. That was what the uroko who deciphered the characters had conjectured.

Yae had formed another hypothesis on top of that. The pillar stuck into the ground was likely the remains of a torii; that made her think Lady *Bihin* might have been a deity who was once worshipped at a shrine. The torii and the shrine could have been carried to this dimension from Japan, or perhaps it was simply that so much time had passed since the shrine was in active use that all of those who had maintained it had abandoned it over time. And now that the shrine had collapsed, the enshrined deity had fallen to evil.

The reason Yae had been chosen as the envoy for the Kaizaka March was because she was found collapsed next to this pillar. Misao, the son of Kaki Province’s chief, had found her unconscious on the ground while playing in the mountains. His family took her in after she was rescued, becoming her caretakers until she grew accustomed to life here. Most uroko ended up with the chief of the province as their guardian. As such, Yae owed Misao’s family and couldn’t refuse the assignment.

She may have been unable to refuse the role, but she was by no means mistreated. Misao and the others had accepted her as a member of their community. Still, Yae didn’t really get along with Misao. That was because Misao did a poor job of masking how little he wished to be around her. Yae could sense his discomfort, and that made things increasingly awkward between them.

That didn’t apply to Misao alone, however. Everyone in Kaki Province felt slightly anxious around Yae because she was different

from the other uroko. She still had the memories from her past life that were supposed to have faded with time, and she didn't behave in a way that matched her physical age. She knew that was the primary reason she made people uncomfortable, but acting like an innocent child while having the mind of a grown woman was not something she could do. It would be too embarrassing.

Back to the matter at hand, thought Yae. Ten years had passed since she became the envoy for the Kaizaka March, and unless it was her imagination, Lady Bihin had been growing weaker over time.

"By the earth, and by the heavens."

Yae was conscious of Kuroashi's presence beside her as she sang the spell. She couldn't look away from Lady Bihin until she was driven away, so she focused on the soft padding of his footsteps.

"We worship high, we worship low."

Lady Bihin's transformation was a mystery, but Kuroashi was an enigma as well.

Yae thought back to the first time she had served as the Kaizaka March envoy. Lady Bihin had been even more monstrous then. She walked on four legs like a beast and held her sword in her mouth. The miasma around her body was significantly thicker, and its suffocating presence could be felt even from a distance. Yae would catch glimpses of the faces covering her body only when the miasma flickered and thinned like flame. Every one of them was the face of a demon. The innumerable arms on her back wriggled like insects. She was the most repulsive sight Yae had ever seen.

Yae may have had an adult mind, but there were still times when she was held back by her physical age. She panicked when she first saw the unimaginable nightmare that was Lady Bihin, and she dropped the lantern and fell to the ground. Lady Bihin halted her march and turned around, approaching Yae in a fit of hot rage. Just when she thought she was going to die, Kuroashi appeared out of nowhere and bit Yae's arm hard to pester her to stand up. The sight of blood running down her arm snapped her to her senses, and she climbed to her feet.

The scar from that bite was still faintly visible on her arm. It was a scar of warning. She would die if she gave in to fear. The scar reminded her to not forget the hidden, frightening side of this world.

"We worship here and gifts bestow."

As Lady Bihin weakened, Yae thought Kuroashi's form had become clearer. Kuroashi was initially also covered by a thick, fog-like miasma. His eyes were a darkened color like impure honey, and full of hate. Yae didn't know why he'd saved her, but she sensed that it wasn't out of kindness. He growled at her threateningly every time she

flubbed one of her lines.

"In modern day as in times past."

They still didn't have a particularly friendly relationship. He just didn't bite and threaten her like before. The muddiness in his eyes had vanished, and the miasma had been expunged as well. His coat was even nice and fluffy because Yae brushed it on occasion.

...They may not have been friendly, but despite his coldness, Yae knew that Kuroashi had kept her strong. Her past memories had helped her often in this life, but they also made her feel estranged from society. The way her intelligence surpassed her physical age made those around her uncomfortable.

Her adult consciousness prevented her from depending on the chief's family like she should have after they took her in, and she had decided to live independently once she reached the physical age of ten. She felt abnormal and desperately wanted to escape the eyes of others, at least more than she could while living with the chief. Yae's soul recognized itself as part of this world. She missed her old hometown, but she didn't necessarily want to return there.

Yae now thought of this place as her hometown. That was for certain. *I still haven't accepted everything about this world, but it will always be home.*

Not one person tried to stop her when she announced she was leaving the chief's patronage. She had wished to live alone, but it still felt like she had been abandoned, and she remembered the pain well.

Kuroashi, who showed up whenever he pleased, was the only one around whom she could let her guard down. That was why she didn't reject him, even if she got the sense that his true identity might be something less than desirable.

"Hear our worship, heed to the last."

Perhaps it was letting herself get lost in thought that caused everything to go wrong.

Blinking, Yae suddenly realized Lady Bihin had come to a halt. She quickly closed her mouth, stopped moving, and held her breath. It felt like she was playing red light, green light.

Oh, we've already reached the torii. The Kaizaka March ended once Lady Bihin was driven to the crimson pillar. After a short wait, she was supposed to vanish as if melting into the air. Something was different about her this year, though. She turned around and began to approach Yae.

Startled, Yae's eyes darted about. *Why is this happening? I didn't mess up the song. The paper lantern hasn't gone out.*

Lady Bihin drew her sword from its scabbard and walked toward her. The scabbard and the blade itself were as black as obsidian. The fallen god faced the shocked Yae and raised her sword aloft.

Yae couldn't scream. She couldn't even move. Lady Bihin's actions were too sudden. She simply stared at the sword as Lady Bihin swung it down toward her head.

Huh?! Wait, why—?

She was going to die. Yae was sure of that, and it terrified her, but Lady Bihin didn't hit her—she hacked the blade into Kuroashi instead.

What?!

Miasma gushed from Kuroashi's body, spread through the air, and engulfed Yae like a tidal wave. Her vision was painted black. Miasma flooded her mouth, nose, and eyes, and it felt as if her body were melting into darkness. Yae was afraid that it wasn't just her body but her soul as well.

Then, unable to raise even one scream, Yae lost consciousness.



Yae awoke to find herself back in the Whiskey House. She leaped to her feet and surveyed the interior, still half-asleep. She saw the reddish-brown tiles on the wall, the wooden shelves and dresser, and the closed folding door. The crescent-shaped hammock was set up in her living room, but she had been sleeping on the fabric on the floor instead.

“...Why was I holding this black sword in my sleep? It looks familiar...”

Yae looked down at the object she was holding and was shocked when she realized what it was. She wanted to believe the incident during the ceremony was a dream, but this was definitely Lady Bihin's black sword. It was about one meter long. The blade looked like it had a slight curvature to it, and she didn't have the courage to draw it from the scabbard. The guard and the pommel were carved with what appeared to be beasts and flowers, and the decorated portion of the scabbard was the color of lapis lazuli.

This sword is terrifying. It looks like it would curse anyone who held it. Why is the rust gone? Maybe the rust fell away because it escaped Lady Bihin's possession?

While doing her best not to look at the sword, Yae bent down, pulled a floor cushion toward her, and wrapped it around the weapon... The cushion barely hid the weapon at all, but it was better than nothing.

I should probably tell the chief about this as soon as possible, Yae thought. How would she explain it, though? Would she tell him about how Lady Bihin suddenly turned around during the ceremony and

sliced Kuroashi with her sword? Would she mention that she didn't know how she brought the sword home? Or that she didn't even remember returning home in the first place?

No, those are the words of a crazy person. No one would believe me. Yae was sure of that. People already thought of her as an eccentric uroko; they would avoid her even more if she told anyone what had happened.

Yae exhaled a large breath to calm her fear and unrest, and just then, the black sword suddenly began to rattle.

"Wh-what the heck?! How terrifying!"

Yae stepped back, and the black sword rolled itself out of the floor cushion. It then fell silent and motionless.

What's with this sword? It's so weird...

She wrapped the sword in the cushion again with trembling hands, and it rattled even more irritably than last time, knocking the cushion away and crashing to the floor in front of Yae. It could not have been any clearer that it disapproved of being hidden in the floor cushion.

"There's no way a sword with a will of its own isn't cursed... Hey! Can you quit that rattling?! You're freaking me out!" Yae yelled.

This was one demanding sword!

"Oh, what should I do? ...I just need to calm down. I performed the ceremony just as I was taught. I'm not at fault here. I'll just take the sword to the chief right away—goodness, will you stop rattling?! I don't like that attitude! You're giving off major 'I'm going to curse you for life if you give me to anyone else' vibes right now!"

The black sword fell silent as if to confirm her words. Yae watched it with trepidation for some time before building up the courage to speak.

"I'm sorry, I don't think I have it in me to live with a sentient sword, so you really need to go... Do you have to vibrate that loudly?! Stop it! You're really scaring me!"

Yae scooted backward on the floor, and the black sword clattered noisily and pursued. It came to a full stop in front of her. She had never seen such an assertive sword. She wished it would take a few lessons from her cooking knives. *They* never rattled on their own. She would have to give them a nice sharpening later to show her appreciation.

"Ummm... You *are* Lady Bihin's sword, right?" Yae asked timidly, hugging herself. The sword didn't respond. What did she expect? She had just asked a *sword* a question. If anyone saw her, they would have thought she was insane. "I know, I'll leave it by the crimson pillar... Huh, does that rattling mean you don't want that, either?!"

It seemed like the one thing the black sword didn't want was to be

left anywhere other than her house. *I guess I have no choice but to keep it as a pet*, Yae despaired. She didn't think she could ever bring herself to love it, no matter how hard she tried.

What do you want me to do? Yae appealed internally to the strange cursed sword.

II A Story of Giving Up on Giving Up

Yae's life with her unwelcome new roommate went surprisingly well, as long as she ignored the occasional rebellious vibration. The black sword didn't move much, it didn't eat, and it didn't speak. All she had to do was set it against the wall, and that was it. The only catch was that she had to take it with her every time she left the house. When she muttered about how ridiculous it was that she had to walk a black sword instead of something more reasonable like, say, a black *Labrador*, it rattled harder than ever.

Yae felt incredibly guilty when she told the chief that the ceremony was a success. She was also terrified of the prospect of Lady Bihin appearing at some point to reclaim her sword. But after having a nightmare where the black sword danced around her as she sat on the floor, she couldn't bring herself to tell the chief the truth. The second day, she had a nightmare of Kuroashi staring her down with the sword in his mouth. Oh yeah, what happened to that tiger? There were so many things she didn't understand. The fourth night, she went to sleep holding the black sword, tired of being afraid and wishing for something, *anything*, to go ahead and happen.

She got her wish.



The next day, Yae received a summons from Chief Kadaru and walked to an assembly hall built on the mountain slope with the magnificent, terraced fields.

"I'm one of the women being married to Miya Province?"

Kadaru had informed her—after what could hardly be called a proper greeting—that he was marrying off ten women from Kaki Province to a neighboring province. Yae had been preparing herself to be berated, convinced that he had found out about her failure to

report the black sword, so the unexpected news caught her off guard.

The wooden assembly hall resembled a row house, and Yae and Kadaru were the only two people inside it. She could hear the bright voices of laughing children outside. Clear rays of sunlight slipped in through the half-open round windows and lit the wooden floor with a white shine.

"The other nine women are one of my daughters, two others from my family, and six from the village," Kadaru said calmly.

Kadaru appeared to be in his forties, and he was a big man like his son, Misao. His hair and eye color both matched his son's, but a prudence gained from age was visible in his face. His drooping eyes hinted at his kind nature.

And from his back extended a single brightly colored wing.

"Why are you, um...?" Unsure of how to ask the question politely, Yae fell silent.

Kadaru smiled grimly and brushed some reddish-brown hair away from his forehead. "The official reason is to reinvigorate exchange with Miya Province, which has been stone-cold for some time now. But truth be told, both sides found plenty of benefit in this arrangement."

"I'm always impressed by how you can be so ruthless and still look so calm," Yae said, giving him a glare. Kadaru laughed heartily in response, creases forming next to his eyes.

"And I've always respected your smarts. Honestly, I don't want to give you to them," Kadaru admitted.

"Why was I chosen?" Yae asked. Kadaru's smile turned to a grimace.

"Miya Province has been dealing with increasing amounts of deformation. I thought you might be able to help get a handle on the situation, Dr. Yae," Kadaru answered, staring at her fixedly. Yae stared back with the same expression.

Deformation was a phenomenon that caused a thing not bound by the power of a name to morph into a different, often stranger entity. There were various types of deformation, but the following was the most common. Say there was an apple, but no one knew it was called an apple. Instead of its associated word, people just referred to it by descriptions like *red thing*, *round thing*, *sweet fruit*, and *tasty ball*. This would cause its existence to become fuzzy.

Once that happened, its true nature would warp, and its shape would change. It wouldn't be a huge problem if it turned into something harmless, but things suffering from deformation often repeated these transformations over and over until they became terrible monsters.

Yae had her own theory as to why this strange phenomenon

occurred. *I wonder if things with a name lose their sense of self once all people who called them by that name are gone.* It was essentially amnesia. The thing was fighting to become something tangible, something recognized, and in doing so brought on the symptoms of deformation.

Deformation was considered a disease in this world. What made it troublesome was that objects, plants, and even spirits could contract it. Though oddly, it was rare for livestock bred in villages to be affected.

The reason people granted Yae the distinguished title of *doctor* despite her having the appearance of a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old-girl was because she could prevent an outbreak of deformation. Ever since she was a young girl, she had been finding plants that seemed like they might be at risk of contracting deformation and performing Appellation—or naming—charms.

It wasn't anything impressive, really. She had just lived in a place abundant with nature in her previous life and used to go on walks to pick edible plants. As a result, she knew the names of more plants and animals than the average person. She was also good at making diagrams because of her work experience.

But naming a thing just once had no effect. It needed to be done right. It was essential that the characters in the name reflected the thing's true nature, and without writing the name multiple times, fixing labels, and spreading the word so that it became common knowledge, the naming was pointless.

Yae didn't do this work just out of the goodness of her heart; she did it for selfish reasons as well. Being attacked and devoured by a dandelion that turned into an octopus monster while she was out on a walk was something she would rather not experience.

Be that as it may, it was nothing more than a preventive measure she did in her free time. She had never once performed a proper treatment, as a doctor would, on something that had already contracted deformation. The subjects of her Appellation had all been plants in a harmless state. Treating a person or spirit was out of her league.

"...Truthfully speaking, they consider my daughter Oshiro the jewel of the arrangement," Kadaru said blankly, lifting the gloomy mood.

"Lady Oshiro is very beautiful," Yae responded.

Yae thought of Oshiro, Kadaru's daughter who was turning eighteen this year, and felt a wave of admiration. She had fiery red hair, plush pink lips, and large eyes. All the men in Kaki Province turned around, spellbound, when she passed. When Yae thought of her own unruly black hair and sticklike figure, she wondered if Oshiro

was a different species altogether. *Don't think that way, Yae. It's not what you say, it's how you say it. I have luscious long black hair and a slender frame...! Ugh, that's not convincing at all...*

"She is still ignorant of the world, but she will perform her role," he said, appraising his own daughter calmly. To Yae, it sounded quite harsh.

The chief had four wives and sixteen children, including his biological offspring and the uroko he had taken in. In this world, it was perfectly acceptable for a husband or a wife to have other partners, provided they had their spouse's permission. Put bluntly, marriages were performed with the mindset of "be fruitful and multiply." It was a difficult world in which to survive to adulthood, so the more children the better.

"I understand the situation, but...will they be okay with me?" Yae asked hesitantly. She didn't necessarily dislike the notion of being married off to a neighboring province. This world was different from her last one, and it was rare for people to marry someone they liked.

"Are you worried they won't be attracted to you?"

Yae smiled faintly and nodded in response to his ill-mannered question. Along with deformation and the enlargement of mysteries, this world had one more strange characteristic.

"Hmm, it's true that your Nature never emerged despite your growth. I was sure you would have a Gentle Nature because you were awakened here in Kaki Province... And you're not an elebeast, either," Kadaru muttered.

Yae stole a quick glance at him. The single richly colored wing on his back was proof that he was an elebeast. *This world resembles ancient Japan, but it sure does differ in some major ways.* She dropped her gaze.

Nearly everyone in this world was born as an elebeast, a type of person with some bestial feature like Kadaru's wing. Some could transform into a beast or possessed special beast-like abilities. There weren't many people who looked like ordinary humans, such as Yae.

Whether or not a person was an elebeast wasn't all that important in society. What *was* important was one's Nature. The Four Natures were the biggest factor that made this world distinct from her last. It could be thought of like the four blood types and their related personalities. The Four Natures gave rough shape to a person's personality like many believed blood types did, but Nature was also directly linked to a person's soul. It was tied to instincts, which greatly impacted a person's emotions.

The Four Natures were as follows: Wild Nature, Gentle Nature, Blessed Nature, and Strange Nature.

Most people with a Wild Nature were men. They had fierce, rough masculine instincts and often possessed elebeast features.

Most people with a Gentle Nature were women. They were gentle and kind and tended to dislike conflict.

Almost all born with a Blessed Nature had divine power. This was a rare Nature. Their divine power allowed them to perform magic, but many had special beast abilities as well.

Peculiarly, most of those with a Strange Nature were intersex. This was also a rare Nature. It was somewhat possible to influence the Nature of a child, but the birth rate of Strange-Natured people was still extremely low. They also tended to live short lives, though a short life here was normal by human standards.

The Four Natures lived in a sort of rivalry with one another. Wild Natures were the toughest and lived long lives that stretched two hundred years, and they were greatly attracted to Gentle Natures. Gentle Natures, on the other hand, detested Wild Natures.

Strange Natures were easy targets, so they kept their distance from the other Natures. Unfortunately for them, however, their souls released a sweet fragrance that attracted others like insects to nectar. Blessed Natures and Strange Natures did not get along, despite their similarities.

The Four Natures had a strong impact on a person's lifestyle. Just about every village was primarily made up of one Nature. Other Natures existed within the province as well, of course, but they were much less common. Kaki Province was a gathering of Gentle-Natured people. There were more women than men, so the village sustained itself primarily through farming. On the contrary, Miya Province was composed primarily of Wild-Natured people. The majority of the population was male, and they primarily sustained themselves with hunting.

Yae didn't have a nature. This situation was referred to as Natureless.

"...I don't think a Wild-Natured man would be happy to be paired with a Natureless woman," Yae said dejectedly, no longer able to bear Kadaru's piercing gaze.

"You're probably right," Kadaru agreed readily. "He probably won't reject you, but he won't be happy about it, either. Wild-Natured men are especially attracted to Gentle-Natured women."

"And yet you chose me as one of the women to be married off... knowing that I would disappoint my husband?"

Kadaru laughed wryly as if he could hear Yae calling him a brute in her head.

"The villagers of Miya Province are insisting that deformations have increased because the laws of harmony have been disturbed. They believe that homogeneous marriages are to blame, so they want an influx of different Natures."

This “homogeneous marriage” didn’t refer to a marriage between two men or two women, but rather a marriage between two people of the same Nature. Heterogenous marriage, then, held the opposite meaning.

“That is why they asked for Gentle-Natured women,” Kadaru finished, crossing his arms and rustling his wing. Yae spoke up hesitantly.

“I would think that homogenous marriages and the deformation outbreak are unrelated.”

“You would be right. I hardly think it is the true cause. However, any offhand remark will come to mean something if repeated often enough. Lies turn to superstition, get handed down as legend, and eventually masquerade as truth. As someone who knows the power of naming, you should be aware of the danger of that, correct?”

“...Yes, I am.”

“More importantly, I don’t want them attacking Kaki Province seeking Gentle-Natured women,” Kadaru said matter-of-factly. Yae figured that was his true motive for this arrangement. “It is undeniable that the populations of both Kaki Province and Miya Province have skewed too heavily toward one Nature. I, too, would appreciate some extra men to help kill monsters born from deformation.”

“Does that mean the same number of Wild-Natured men from Miya Province are being married into families here?” Yae asked.

“Just so,” he confirmed, once again eyeing Yae as if measuring her worth. “I appreciate the exchange of villagers, but I don’t want to hear of the women we sent being abused just because the number of deformation cases didn’t decrease. I can’t allow them to use that as an excuse to invade.”

...And that, then, is his biggest motive, Yae thought. “Oh, I see... That’s why you chose me.”

Kadaru smiled. “Once you’ve spent a few years in Miya Province satisfying the arrangement, you’re welcome to divorce and then return here.”

“You should really try to be a little more considerate, Chief Kadaru.”

“Hmm? No, it really will be a blow to lose you. Since you perform most of the ceremonies for us, we will have to train new people to take your place.”

That wasn’t what she had meant. Yae mulled over his words. Even he didn’t expect her marriage to work out, despite being the one behind the scheme. Furthermore, he didn’t *want* it to work out...or perhaps that was wishful thinking on Yae’s part. Though his invitation to return once she had handled the other province’s deformation

outbreak seemed some proof that he valued her.

“Anyway, I thank you for your understanding in this situation,” Kadaru said. He was indirectly threatening that she couldn’t back out of the marriage. Yae looked at him with a mixed expression.

“Of course. But if they tell me to get lost as soon as they find out I’m Natureless, I’ll return here right away,” she stated. If that happened, she didn’t want to take any blame.

“Oh dear. I would like you to try a little harder than that,” Kadaru responded with a smile. Sensing that he had nothing left to say, Yae stood up and spoke.

“There would be no need to, would there? Even if the deformation continues, the fact that they turned me away would protect Kaki Province. And I wouldn’t need to force myself to spend years living there.”

“That’s true.”

He’s clearly already thought that far ahead. Yae pouted internally, and she decided to give him a taste of her true feelings as she left. It wasn’t anything as dramatic as revenge. The chief had a nice side despite his cool demeanor, so she expected this would make him regret what he had done at least a little.

“I hate being lied to, but I wish you could have at least pretended you were marrying me off for my own happiness, Father.”

After Yae left, Kadaru sighed.

“Oh, Yae, how unfair of you to choose now to finally call me Father...”



The chiefs had made their arrangements, but they weren’t able to convince the women to leave right away. Gentle Natures instinctively avoided rough Wild Natures.

Oshiro immediately rejected the marriage. Her family convinced her in the end, but she still insisted that she needed time to adjust to the idea. Miya Province was stressed about the deformation problem and pressed for the women to be sent within a few weeks, but Oshiro’s stubborn protests led to the marriages being delayed to the seventh moon. Oshiro likely would have been called selfish and pressured to back down if she had been the only one making this demand, but the other women besides Yae firmly added their voices to hers. Ignoring all of them would have led to resistance from the people.

Oshiro and the other women were surprised when they learned that Yae was one of the ten to be married off, and they even consoled

her.

“Why did you go along with it, Yae? You should have refused even if you had to tear him a new one to do it,” Oshiro told her. She could be surprisingly belligerent for a Gentle Nature. “Good grief, why does Father think he can treat you this way? It’s as if all the kindness was expelled from his brain to make room for his intelligence.”

Yae burst out laughing at Oshiro’s tirade. Kadaru considered Oshiro to be ignorant of the ways of the world. He wasn’t wrong in the sense that she knew nothing of life outside Kaki Province, but she was no fool. She inferred the reason that Yae was chosen as one of the brides and felt sorry for her. While Yae doubted she knew divorce and a return to Kaki Province were in the equation, the kindness of Oshiro and the other women made her feel truly happy.

Not everyone was so nice to her, though; she was greatly resented by those villagers chosen as new envoys for the ceremonies. The ceremony rites were terrifying, and envoys risked death to perform them. Now that Yae was stepping down, the pressure had shifted to the remaining villagers.

Living your life without anyone hating you is unrealistic. That was what Yae told herself. Even if she wasn’t personally at fault, being resented didn’t feel good.

The bridal furniture was sent to Miya Province ahead of time, and Miya Province did the same for the grooms. The women would bring nothing with them, and no family would be allowed to come. Their future husbands were going to ride to Kaki Province on horseback and escort them to their new home.

The women would wear colorful veils that covered their faces down to their waists until they arrived in Miya Province. That was so the men wouldn’t reject their brides on the spot if they didn’t like how they looked. If they voiced such complaints after reaching their village, they would be ridiculed as narrow-minded. In Yae’s case, however, there was a high chance that no one would blame the man for rejecting her.

When the day of the trip arrived, Yae was put onto the back of a red horse by a brawny man with thick arms. The future husbands from Miya Province were also wearing full-body veils of long black fabric that showed only their eyes, but it was impossible to hide their muscular physiques. Their upper and lower clothes were white, and the cuffs and hems of their robes had bold geometric patterns.

Even the Natureless Yae could feel the incredible aura the Wild-Natured men projected. It had a violence to it, almost like it could crumple Yae’s soul like paper just by proximity. It was like she was being assaulted by billows of hot air. She didn’t *actually* feel any heat, but she couldn’t help but be intimidated. The other women could feel

the auras of the men more keenly, and they all looked to be on the verge of fainting from fear. Yae was worried about them.

The brawny husbands-to-be all wore weapons on their shoulders and backs as if to demonstrate that they were warriors and hunters. Yae saw bow cases, spears, and swords, some of which were themselves curved like bows.

The women sat on the horses alone, and the men led them by foot. Ten women were being married off at once, so it made for quite a procession.

“Miya Province is located in the valley of Mount Mebiro, on the other side of Mount Yagi.”

The man leading the procession spoke calmly, as if trying to console the trembling women. His voice *was* calm, but it was much deeper than that of the elegant men of Kaki Province. There were Wild-Natured men in Kaki Province as well, but they had adapted to the Gentle Natures around them, and none of them had auras as violent as these men. *Pure Wild Natures are unbelievable*, Yae thought to herself timidly.

“...You may be scared of us, but we wouldn’t hurt a woman for no reason. You have no need to worry,” he added kindly, but the women on the horses did not stop shaking.

Yae was intimidated for a different reason. *Does “we wouldn’t hurt a woman for no reason” mean they would if they did have a reason?*

The man leading her horse had been darting his eyes at her curiously for some time. Despite being Natureless, Yae could sense someone else’s Nature. Naturally, the men could sense the Natures of the women as well. The man couldn’t sense anything from Yae, and he was bewildered by it. Natureless people were so rare that there might not even be one in an entire village, so it probably wouldn’t occur to him right away what she was.

A chill ran down Yae’s back. He was probably going to ask her about her Nature before they arrived at the village. She could handle him being disappointed, but what if he flew into a rage because Kaki Province sent a Natureless woman, even though it was common knowledge that Wild-Natured men liked Gentle-Natured women?

Maybe I should’ve taken that sword for self-protection, Yae thought with regret. She had been hesitant to take the vibrating black sword with her out of Kaki Province given the identity of its original owner, so she had decided to wrap it securely in cloth and leave it in the Whiskey House. No one would be using the place while she was gone, and she asked Kadaru not to let anyone enter her house. She figured she would be back in a few years, or even a few days.

But she had been naive. It seemed like Yae wasn’t one to speak about being ignorant of the world. She had judged all Wild Natures by

those living in Kaki Province without a second thought and had been totally unprepared for the violent auras of these pure Wild-Natured men.

Yae had resigned herself sometime after her conversation with Kadaru to only living in Miya Province temporarily in order to control the deformation outbreak. She was sure her husband wasn't going to accept her. As such, she had been treating this as an extended business trip. She still thought that was the right mindset, but she wished she had more seriously considered the danger of her husband doing more than just rejecting her.

Yae and the procession circled around the foot of Mount Yagi as they headed for Mount Mebiro. Traveling across the mountainside would have shortened the trip, but there were many cliffs on the back side of Mount Yagi, making the road somewhat precipitous, not to mention the dangerous animals they might encounter there. The women from Kaki Province almost never ventured that way, and the men were likely being considerate of them. Walking around the foot of the mountain was a bit of a detour, but it was the safer route.

They only stayed on the beaten path for about half an hour, however, after which they forced their way onto the mountain and pushed through tall wild grass. Two butterflies searching for nectar flew past Yae, flying in perfect harmony like a pair of lovers.

"Miya Province is in the valley, but it's a bit difficult to find. The path around the foot of the mountain from here is interrupted by cliffs, so it would be difficult for you all to manage," a man said, politely explaining their change of route.

Yae looked up at the densely packed giant trees around them. Everything was bigger in this world. Livestock such as horses, pigs, and rabbits were all a size larger. Animals and plants tended to get bigger the closer you got to mountain summits and forbidden grounds. *The mysteries that drift in from my former world are so big they tower over you*, Yae recalled.

Thinking about that was Yae's way of escaping from reality. There was no other way she could handle the persistent gaze of the man leading her horse. It looked like he was starting to get suspicious. *What should I do? Maybe I should speak up and try to convince him that while I may be Natureless, I have knowledge that can prevent deformation?*

Yae felt empty for a moment at the thought of pandering to the man, but she quickly shook off that pointless sentimentality. She could bear just about any pain if she thought back to the day she devoured that rotten fruit to survive. Underneath the front she put on for others and her own sense of reason was an intense desire to live. Back then, she had hungered for life like she was starving. All she had to do was close her eyes to remember the bitter taste of that fruit.

Yae knew what it was like to live through an extreme situation. *That was the most helpless and painful moment I've ever experienced. I'm perfectly happy now compared to then. There's nothing I can't endure,* she assured herself. She had decided to explain her position before the man asked any questions and was just about to speak when she was interrupted.

"Wait!" The man in front of the procession raised his hand and called out in a deep voice to stop everyone behind him. "There's something ahead of us." The man grabbed the spear from his back. Oshiro, who was sitting on the horse he had been leading, looked back at the women with concern.

"Is it a boar? Or a bear?" a man in the middle of the procession asked quietly.

"No, it's not..." The leader stared ahead fixedly. "It's a shade," he declared, clicking his tongue.

Yae and the women gasped. A shade was a monster with a soul afflicted by deformation. Once the soul completely transformed, there was no going back.

"To think one would appear on this day of celebration... I guess the ash we sprinkled on the road didn't work. Here it comes."

The Miya Province men reached for their weapons and readied themselves in perfect unison. Some even removed their veils and transformed into lions or wolves. Elebeasts with a Wild Nature often possessed the forms of beasts of prey.

It was clear from the warrior-like eyes of the men that the shade was approaching the procession with the intent to attack. Feeling nervous, Yae reached for a small bag that was tucked inside her sash. Almost all monsters, including shades, spirits, and fallen gods, hated the ashes of peach trees. She always carried a small bag containing some on the off chance it was needed.

...Wait, I don't have it?! Yae was beside herself with shock. It's all because of these clothes!

She had planned to change into her wedding garments after arriving in Miya Province. She was currently wearing formal clothes that were a little easier to move in, but they were not what she usually wore and were of a higher quality silk than her everyday outfit. The colorful veil was red, green, and yellow, and just like the men, her robe and pants were white with geometric patterns on the cuffs and hem. She must have forgotten the bag when she changed her clothes.

Of course I wouldn't have it the one time I actually need it! She was furious with herself for her oversight.

Then a strange sound reached Yae's ears. The others heard it, too. Something was rushing toward them, crashing into the trees and

kicking off the ground violently. The rays of the midday sun peeking through the branches illuminated the creature as it appeared before the group.

It was a monster with six heads and many legs like a spider. It was about twice as tall as the men. Its six heads—a cow, horse, frog, boar, monkey, and bird—were positioned in a circle like a string of prayer beads. The round, puffy eyes of each head reminded her of a Japanese *dogu* figurine. The eyelids were squinted like those of a Buddha, and the corners of their mouths were curled up or down in large smiles and frowns.

Most shades were flamboyantly colorful. Some had a design like marble and others like tie-dye. Some even had color patterns so complex that to look upon one was an experience akin to looking through a kaleidoscope. The more colorful the monster the more dangerous, and the more likely it was to try to eat people or livestock, as if trying to take the place of what it devoured.

The men who had transformed into beasts attacked the shade first, trying to bite off its spiderlike legs. A chunk of flesh flew toward Yae and fell to the ground with a *splorch*.

“Those in the rear, take the women and go forward!” the leading man yelled. He and three of the men who had turned into beasts intended to stay behind to kill the shade. They fought in perfect sync.

The others moved quickly and jumped onto the horses behind the trembling women. The man who had been leading Yae’s horse climbed up behind her as well. He gave a piercing whistle, and they raced ahead, guiding the horses that were only carrying women.

They didn’t get far before a woman screamed. She had fallen from her horse. Women from Kaki Province could ride horses, but they couldn’t match the horsemanship of the warriors from Miya Province. They had been riding at full speed and jumping over rocks and fallen trees without slowing; there was no way the women were going to be able to handle that kind of violent movement. Another woman tugged recklessly on the reins to try to go back and help the one who fell, but she, too, lost her balance.

In another stroke of bad luck, a new shade appeared from the shadows of the forest. It was bipedal and shaped like a stick insect. Once again taller than the men, this one had two heads—one a white crow, the other a black dog. It was slow, but its flexible whiplike arms spelled trouble. Its attack hit Yae’s horse.

“Look out...!” Yae shouted.

The horse was struck hard in the side, and it fell, neighing in distress. Yae and the man crashed to the ground like rag dolls. The man quickly got up and extended a hand toward her. She was holding her back in great pain; she had landed on it hard. Yae looked up and

reached for his hand, and she was startled when their eyes met. The man was looking at her with surprise as well.

The Four Natures could be sensed from a person's aura, but the easiest way to tell was a person's eyes. When seen under the light, a ring crest was faintly visible in the iris of those with a Nature. The shape and color of the crest differed depending on the person. Some were shaped like flower petals, others like interlocking rings, and others like diamonds. Some were complex and others simple. They functioned somewhat like family crests, and those of blood relatives looked similar.

Natureless people, however, didn't have one. Yae had perfectly normal black eyes. *Well, now he knows.* It wasn't bad that she was Natureless, but hiding it deliberately would be dishonest. The Four Natures were very important in this world, especially when it came to getting married.

The man clearly scowled as he stared at her. He didn't take back his hand, but Yae thought she saw disappointment and doubt in his green eyes. She couldn't decide if that was just paranoia on her part or not. In his irises, she could see a ring crest of three interlocking circles.

"What are you doing?!" another man shouted angrily, coming over to grab Yae's arm and yank her to her feet. He then saw her eyes as well, and his anger was replaced by surprise. He peered into her face as if to get a closer look. "Are you Natureless?" he muttered.

Yae's breath caught in her throat. She hesitantly started to nod, and just then, a woman screamed loudly.

Yae turned toward the scream and saw the stick-insect shade raging after having a few of its arms cut off by the men. Its howling tore through the air. It waved its arms about, gouging tree trunks and sending bark flying. The women nearby were screaming with fear.

The man holding Yae's arm shoved her aside and raced for the women. The green-eyed man quickly grabbed the reins of the agitated horse before it ran off and jumped onto its back. He gave the horse a short command and a kick in the side to make it run, drew the katana on his back with one hand, and sliced off one of the shade's arms.

"There are more coming from farther back!"

"We're at a disadvantage guarding the women! We need to retreat!"

The men shared a brief exchange and chose to retreat without hesitation. They sent the women who were comparatively skilled at riding ahead alone. The women who had fallen off or fainted were placed on horses with the men.

After more than half of them had left on horseback, the green-eyed man turned toward Yae as if just remembering her. She was still

sitting on the ground helplessly. She wasn't frozen in fear—she couldn't get up because of the pain in her back from falling off the horse.

"She's Natureless! Leave her!" a man yelled. It was the one who had grabbed her arm earlier. He ignored Yae and looked at the green-eyed man. He had Oshiro on his horse and had been about to leave. "Hurry up! Another one's coming!"

Oshiro opened her eyes wide and murmured Yae's name, but her voice was drowned out by the horse's hooves once they started moving. The green-eyed man spurred his horse on after them. Yae, dumbfounded, watched the horse's rear as it galloped off, kicking up grass and dust into the air.

They hadn't just left her behind—they had used her as a decoy so the stick-bug shade they had failed to kill and the new one approaching wouldn't pursue them. Yae grit her teeth to hold down the strong emotions welling up inside her. It was essential that she remain calm. What could she do, though? She could barely even hold a weapon.

The new shade the men had mentioned arrived before she could make any kind of decision. It was also shaped like a stick insect and was a size bigger than the wounded one. Yae was so frightened that she forgot to breathe, and she watched in shock as the two shades began to gnaw at each other. The newcomer consumed the wounded one in a flash, not even giving Yae time to run.

The surviving monster had bloodred skin and one head. Its unsettling face was limp and distorted like an old clay figure. It was bald, but in place of hair, the back of its head was covered in moss. Its four long arms dragged on the ground. There was a torn skirt around its waist—the presence of clothes meant it was originally a villager of some province. That was a shock to Yae.

It was possible for elebeasts to contract deformation, though much rarer for humans who didn't have beast features. Once the condition got this bad, there was no charm that could restore a person's humanity. The soul was completely transformed.

The shade looked down at Yae blankly. She heard its shallow breaths, like the hollow *whoosh* of wind through a cave. After staring at each other for a good while, the shade suddenly grabbed hold of her. Its giant, sinewy hands lifted Yae's body as if she were no more than a doll. She struggled for breath as its powerful hands applied intense pressure to her stomach, and she felt a pounding headache behind her eyes.

"Ow! Let go of me! That hurts!"

Unable to bear the pain, Yae groaned and scratched at the back of the monster's hand. Rotten skin tore off and caught in her fingernails,

and the stench of humus filled the air. The shade's body was already decaying.

Yae lost the will to resist. The shade readjusted its grip and carried her deeper into the mountain. It walked silently up a sparsely wooded slope, heading for a cavern in the cliffside ahead of them. There was a hole the shape of a smiling mouth, or a crescent moon laid on its side, underneath a rough ochre-colored wall. The pitch-black gap was small enough that an adult would have to crawl to get through it.

Yae noticed something dark extending languidly from the hole like a tongue. She looked closely and saw that it was a deer skin. It looked black because the ground around it was soaked in blood. The flesh, entrails, and even the bones had been extracted from the torn abdomen. Unable to look away, Yae saw the carcasses of small birds scattered around the deer. The shade likely consumed its prey inside the crescent-shaped cavern. Either that or it was using the cavern as a temporary place to store them. This ominous thought filled Yae with disgust, and even more than that, with fear.

"No, let me go! I don't want to go in there!"

Yae bent backward and swung her arms and legs violently, but the giant shade seemed indifferent to her resistance. It glanced down at her once and showed no further reaction.

Damn it all! I will never marry a Wild-Natured man! The men from Miya Province obviously hadn't wished for the shade to appear, but Yae had to curse them for what they'd done. Deep down in her heart, she had thought that if the people of Miya Province were willing to accept a Natureless woman, she might happily live out her life there. But that small hope was gone now.

Kadaru had told her they were struggling with a surge of deformation incidents and could use her knowledge. The joy of being helpful to someone was like a drug to people who lacked self-confidence. She had even allowed herself the naive hope that she and her future husband might grow to love each other. In her current life, Yae was a teenage girl, and she had had a decent amount of romantic experience in her previous one. She knew firsthand how love could enrich one's daily life. But even if she miraculously survived, could she ever love a man who had abandoned her? He wouldn't even be starting from zero—he'd have to work his way up from the negatives.

They sacrificed one to save many. They didn't necessarily want to make that choice, but it doesn't make me feel any better as the one they left for dead.

Yae felt disgusted with herself for trying to be objective even as she stared her demise in the face. It was important that she kept her cool, but she didn't need to suppress her emotions to that extent. *In*

reality, I'm not the least bit okay with how they treated me. Anger at her current predicament and resentment from always being the one left behind broiled within her.

Yae had developed a bad habit of hiding such unbecoming thoughts under a veneer of detachment. Though she kept it to herself, she hated the way Kadaru used her as a pawn in his plans. All the things she should have said rose to the surface of her mind like bubbles. She knew nothing good came of regrets, but she couldn't help herself.

If she became more candid with people, though, what would she do when annoyance showed on their faces, making it clear she was bothering them? Even a smile could mean that a person really liked you or that they merely tolerated you. Her heart would surely freeze up if she realized what she was seeing was the latter.

Yae knew she couldn't expect everyone to be sunshine and rainbows with her all the time. But she couldn't stand it when people openly displayed more kindness to others than to her, even if it was only a slight difference. Knowing she was asking too much but understanding her own feelings, she had tried to act magnanimous this time around. She told herself to behave like an adult.

I'm an idiot. She'd thought she just wanted to live. She'd thought that would be enough for her. But that was a lie. She wanted to be loved—truly loved—by someone in this world, and she wanted to love them back with all her heart. It had been her hope that that would lead to happiness. No, *had been* was wrong; she still wanted that even now.

Yae felt as if the feelings she had been fighting hard to suppress were roaring to life now that death was near.

"I don't want to die!" she screamed with all her energy, and then she noticed something ahead.

The bloody deer skin that was sticking out of the crescent-shaped hole in the cavern suddenly swelled. It was as if someone had emerged from underground beneath it. The shade, which had been about to enter the cavern with Yae in hand, stopped as if on guard.

Two round eyes the color of sunflowers and brighter than the moon peeked out from under the deer skin. Yae looked on in astonishment as a giant black figure flew out like an arrow and attacked. She realized who it was and shouted without thinking.

"Lord Kuroashi!"

It had been some time since she had last laid eyes on him, but it was none other than Kuroashi who bit into the shade's side. Kuroashi's assault caused the monster's grip to weaken, and Yae tumbled to the ground. She hastily crawled away and only turned around after she had put a good distance between herself and the shade.

Kuroashi destroyed the monster in no time. He tore off its arms and face with his sharp claws and crushed its windpipe between his jaws. The shade raised one last, hateful cry and transformed into a black clump of earth filled with stones, branches, and dead insects, which collapsed on the spot.

Kuroashi flicked his long tail and watched the corpse of the shade with labored breathing. *Multiple men from Miya Province together couldn't defeat that shade, and he killed it in seconds.*

For some reason, however, Kuroashi had a large wound on his back. Yae noticed it was a sword wound, and then she remembered the sight of Lady Bihin slashing him with her sword on the night of the Kaizaka March. The wound hadn't closed even though it was now the seventh moon, and fresh blood was spilling from it. Strangely, the blood disappeared without a trace when it hit the ground, as if it were some kind of illusion.

"What are you doing here, Lord Kuroashi?" Yae asked hoarsely from her position on the ground.

Kuroashi fixed his eyes on her and began to approach, his breathing still labored. She was intimidated by his otherworldly figure and staggered to her feet. He was threatening Yae, with no trace of his usual relaxed attitude. His intention was clear.

"Lord Kuroashi, stop!"

As if sensing Yae would try to run, Kuroashi pounced at her multiple times. Yae fought to avoid Kuroashi's snapping jaws and tripped over her own feet, falling to the ground—directly onto the black earth that had been the shade. She put her hands behind her back and nearly jumped when her fingers brushed something hard. While remaining vigilant of Kuroashi watching her, Yae quickly glanced over her shoulder to see what it was that she had touched.

"...Huh?! The black sword?"

It looked as though the sword that she had left in the Whiskey House was sticking out of the black dirt. She drew it out immediately. It was clearly the same sword. Yae stared in blank amazement at the weapon in her hands and suddenly heard the voice of a man saying "Go."

She jerked her head upward. There was no one there but Kuroashi. "Was that you, Lord Kuroashi?" she asked timidly, and the tiger squinted his sunflower eyes. It seemed like an affirmative answer.

"What do you mean, 'go'? Go where—?" Yae hurriedly jumped up to back away from Kuroashi, who was lumbering toward her, and then gasped. They were suddenly in a completely different place. They should have been next to the crescent-shaped cave, but somehow, they were back in Kaki Province. The sky was almost dark.

What the heck?! She shuddered at the eerie turn and hugged the black sword close. “What’s going on, Lord Kuroashi?” Despite her intense confusion, Yae was positive that the tiger had caused their sudden shift in location. He had saved her from the shade, but she figured that was a coincidence; whatever they were doing here was probably his real purpose. She opened her mouth to ask what in the world he was dragging her into, but Kuroashi growled as if telling her to be quiet.

“*March.*” Kuroashi’s voice reverberated in her head. It was the voice of a young man.

Yae shut her mouth and, trembling, took a look around. They were undoubtedly in Kaki Province. The mountain slopes visible in the dim light were covered by countless terraced fields. She could see the contours of the Whiskey House about halfway up the mountain. The chipped neck was long and thin, and the body was short and stout—a unique silhouette. There were fields in the basin below the terraces as well, and she could just barely make out the meandering river.

She had seen this scenery countless times, but something about it was different. She felt out of place, like everything had been shifted to a slightly different dimension. As evidence, she could sense no people in the area. She heard no insects or birds and felt no wind. It was very similar to the atmosphere when she performed the Kaizaka March.

Is he telling me to perform the ceremony...? Why? Yae was unsure of the reason, but she sensed that she didn’t have time to think about it. There was no sign of any people, but the air held a restlessness that gave her chills. She understood that something terrifying was lurking in the dark.

“...By the earth.”

Yae took off her shoes and forced herself to sing. While cursing her legs, which seemed like they could collapse at any moment, she held the black sword out in front of her with both hands, like an offering, and took one step forward. Kuroashi lined up beside her. Sure enough, he was telling her to perform the ceremony.

It was then that Yae noticed Kuroashi had no shadow. She had noticed, too, that the blood that fell from his wound disappeared inexplicably when it hit the ground. *Maybe Kuroashi is a phantom.* Now that she thought about it, she had never seen anyone else touch the tiger. It had taken Yae many years to become able to touch him herself.

“And by the heavens.”

The unsettling presence all around them grew stronger as she advanced.

“We worship high, we worship low.”

Something was following them.

"We worship here and gifts bestow."

There was more than one presence. She heard the approach of beasts, of people, and of insects; the flapping of wings; the breathing of monsters. A veritable parade of demons was following behind Yae. She was convinced of that.

"In modern day as in times past."

The tips of her fingers tingled from fear. *I was supposed to marry a man from Miya Province. How did it come to this?* Yae racked her brain. *This is all wrong. Since when did marriage become so dangerous?*

"Hear our worship, heed to the last."

She wanted to turn around. She wanted so badly to see what was behind her. Was it really a parade of demons? But whenever Yae was about to stop and give in to temptation, Kuroashi glared up at her in warning.

Which way should I be going? Normally, she chased Lady Bihin to drive her away like in a Japanese *tsuina* ceremony. This time, however, she had no target to expel. Yae climbed the terraced fields and passed through a narrow lane. For now, she figured she should head away from the village basin and aim for the crimson pillar.

"By the hammer, by the high throne."

Her stiff cheeks made it difficult to enunciate, and she felt like she was going to flub the lines of the chant. *I've served as this ceremony's envoy for a long time, but I'm still just as big a coward as I ever was!* She had never watched horror movies. You would never have caught her in a haunted house. She had been a total scaredy-cat in her previous life.

"To the end of days do we sing."

Yae knew the parade of demons behind her would attack as soon as they got the chance. She could hear the slurping of drool, causing her to shake uncontrollably and repeatedly mess up the chant. It was likely Kuroashi's presence at her side that prevented them from striking.

"Seek ye our love overflowing."

Beads of sweat ran down her forehead. She realized she had lost her veil at some point.

"We'll hear no cry, we'll hear no bell."

All too conscious of the commotion behind her, Yae headed out of the village.

"Hear our worship and serve us well."

Yae's cold sweat would not stop. She sang this chant at every ceremony, and it had become almost like a lullaby to her. For some reason, though, she was suddenly consumed with doubt as to its purpose.

At first, she had thought it was simply a string of strange rhymes.

After singing it over and over, she came to think it meant something like this: “We will always perform the festival in this land, so please don’t be mad at us for driving you away.” She believed it was at least partially meant to keep Lady Bihin in check.

Yae had a theory that Lady Bihin was the shadow of a goddess who drifted here from Japan. After losing all her worshippers, she turned into a fallen god that defiled the land with impurity. Yae believed this ceremony might have begun to prevent Lady Bihin from doing harm.

Now, however, she got the feeling the chant wasn’t that simple. She thought it might have a much more condescending meaning, more like this: “Even if we stray from the path, we will continue to give you offerings, cleanse your impurity, and worship you until the end. So don’t cry like a baby, and don’t clamor like a ringing bell. We’ll give you your worship, so obey us for all eternity.” If that was true, then who was the chant trying to force into submission? ...Lady Bihin, of course.

Hold on. What have they been making me do all this time? This was like one of those festivals with secretly terrifying origins. Yae wanted to abandon everything and flee, but she could clearly feel the malice being directed at her from the parade of demons close behind; they would gladly attack if she suspended the ceremony. She had no choice but to continue.

Leaving all that aside for a moment, the sense of distance outside of the village was clearly wrong. How was the crimson pillar right next to the terraced fields? *This is even more proof of my slightly different-dimension theory.*

Yae held the black sword aloft and passed by the giant pillar, still trembling. Normally, her role would be finished here, but due to Lady Bihin’s absence, she didn’t know where to stop. As she fretted over that, another inexplicable anomaly occurred.

The scenery changed once again the moment she passed by the pillar. The ground beneath her feet turned into a stone-paved path that extended straight ahead. Crumbled stone lanterns lined the path on either side, lighting up only once Yae passed by them. She glanced at one of the lanterns to get a closer look and couldn’t have regretted it more. What she expected to be a candle burning with bluish-white light inside the lantern was actually a monkey head.

I never should’ve acted all mature and accepted the role of envoy. If she could go back in time, she would stop her child self from agreeing to everything so easily.

Yae spurred herself onward and felt another wave of regret. She saw a rugged stone monument taller than her standing in the middle of a square fence. The front half of a golden tiger was protruding from

the bottom of the monument. She didn't know how it had gotten its head through the stone, but that was hardly the strangest thing she had seen today, so she didn't question it.

Yae was so afraid that she couldn't blink. She studied the tiger closely. It had white and gold fur and faintly visible black letters on its forehead that looked like Siddham script. Its golden eyes were the dull color of rotten eggs, and there was black shading around them. A string of black prayer beads had been forced into its mouth like a gag. The beads were also wrapped around its front legs, neck, and the monument itself, as if they were doing their best to seal the tiger within the stone.

She didn't have to know anything about this tiger to know it was dangerous. The violent look in its eyes greatly resembled Kuroashi, to the extent that he could have been an alter ego. At that thought, Yae looked to her side and noticed that Kuroashi had vanished. She immediately began to feel lost. When had he left her side?

How can I get out of this bizarre anomaly by myself? She had been entrusted with the role of envoy for the ceremony for many years, but she was Natureless and had no divine power. She didn't have the special abilities of elebeasts, either.

Yae stepped back without thinking, and the golden tiger glared at her with eyes full of resentment. *You can growl at me all you want; I still don't know what to do...*, she thought before realizing something. She still felt the terrifying procession advancing behind her. The golden tiger was probably warning her not to back up. She froze in fear, stuck between a rock and a whole bunch of demons.

When she began to think she would be better off just fainting, the black script carved into the monument began to squirm like a bunch of insects. Yae flinched back, and the markings formed into an indistinct shadow. The shadow took the shape of a person, then morphed into Lady Bihin.

"You're here, too, Lady Bihin?!" Yae could have collapsed on the spot. The rules said you weren't supposed to talk to her, but in this strange situation, how much meaning did the rules even have?

Lady Bihin's face was pitch-black as if covered in ink. Her naked upper body was covered in small beast faces like scabs. The top of her head, her chest, and her stomach had much bigger ogre-like faces. Yae was now positive that Lady Bihin had weakened since the first time she saw her. It was as if her impurity had thinned.

Lady Bihin reached a black arm out from the monument. She grabbed the black beads tied around the tiger and pulled them, slowly dragging the beast back into the stone. It was as if she was trying to prevent its escape. The tiger swung its head in violent resistance.

Yae noticed that the deeper it sank into the monument, the

stronger the presence of the demons behind her grew. The golden tiger stared fixedly at Yae. It was urging her to break the seal if she didn't want to die.

Her hesitation only lasted a moment. Yae wanted to live. Even on the day she found herself reborn in this world, she hadn't wanted to die alone without anyone finding her. She hadn't yet grasped the meaning of her life or her value as a person, but her desire to survive was real.

"I'll save you, so please save me, too," Yae forced out through teeth chattering from fear. "I don't know if you're a god or a monster, but I'll release you for my sake."

The tiger's eyes narrowed. Half-desperate, Yae drew the black sword from its scabbard. The black blade shone like smooth obsidian.

Lady Bihin let go of the beads and reached out toward Yae with arms covered in beast faces. Yae screamed and swung the black sword down on the fallen god's arms. A piercing, agonizing cry arose from the entire monument.

"I can't do this! I'm not built for combat! What should I do next?!"

Yae continued her swing until the black sword struck the stone monument and cut the prayer beads' string. The black beads scattered, and the golden tiger leaped from the monument like water gushing forth from a broken dam. Yae screamed again and cowered on the spot, mistakenly believing it was going to attack her. It easily jumped over her head and charged into the terrifying parade of demons behind her. The lingering screams of the monsters saturated the air.

Yae couldn't afford to turn around. Lady Bihin was about to break free from the beads and escape the monument as well.

"Hey, she's coming! Help me!" she screamed at the golden tiger, which was performing a bloody dance with the parade of demons behind her. She never took her eyes off Lady Bihin. "Please, I'm in big trouble here!!"

"Will you shut up?" a male voice answered calmly.

"Huh?" Yae said, and before she could turn around, someone pulled the black sword from her grip. That person then grabbed her arm and shoved her roughly to the side. She staggered and fell backward, then quickly looked up and studied the person who had pushed her away. It was a well-dressed young man she had never seen before.

"Free, at long last," he said pompously. The sight of him pointing the tip of his sword at Lady Bihin, who had crawled out of the monument, was something Yae would never forget.

He wasn't from Kaki Province. His golden hair was short but tousled, and his long bangs made it difficult to see his eyes. He was wearing a black robe, a golden sash, and tube-shaped shoes made of

black leather. His clothes didn't do much to set him apart from a resident of Kaki Province, but he had a long light-gold cloth draped around his shoulders reminiscent of Fujin or Raijin, the Japanese gods of wind and thunder, respectively.

"It's past time you were sent to the underworld," the man said in annoyance, and he mercilessly swung the black sword down on Lady Bihin. She moaned and was pulled back into the stone monument as if sucked in by a vacuum. A black fog whirled on the surface of the monument before eventually turning back into cursive characters. Without a second glance, the man flipped the hem of his robe, lightly kicked off the ground, and charged into the remaining pack of monsters. Yae turned and saw them for the first time. There was a giant frog with the physique of a plump snowman, a two-headed kappa, a giant monkey—they were all grotesque creatures that Yae regretted ever laying eyes on.

The man carved up the monsters joyfully, looking as if he was having the time of his life. The heavenly raiment around his shoulders fluttered elegantly behind him, but there was nothing elegant about the way he fought. He was like a savage beast or a crazed god of war, blood splashing to the ground with every swing of his sword. Yae could do nothing but stare in blank amazement.

It's like he's playing with them. Yae gulped multiple times. A savage beast was an apt comparison. The man before her, swinging his sword to his heart's content, was undoubtedly the true form of the golden tiger with the Siddham script on its forehead. That made her think he might be an elebeast... But given that he had been sealed away with Lady Bihin, he was probably something more powerful, and not in a good way.

He's not some wrathful god, is he? I might have released something I really shouldn't have... Yae began to worry. She'd had no choice but to free the golden tiger when she was trapped between Lady Bihin and the terrifying parade of monsters, but she was already regretting her decision.

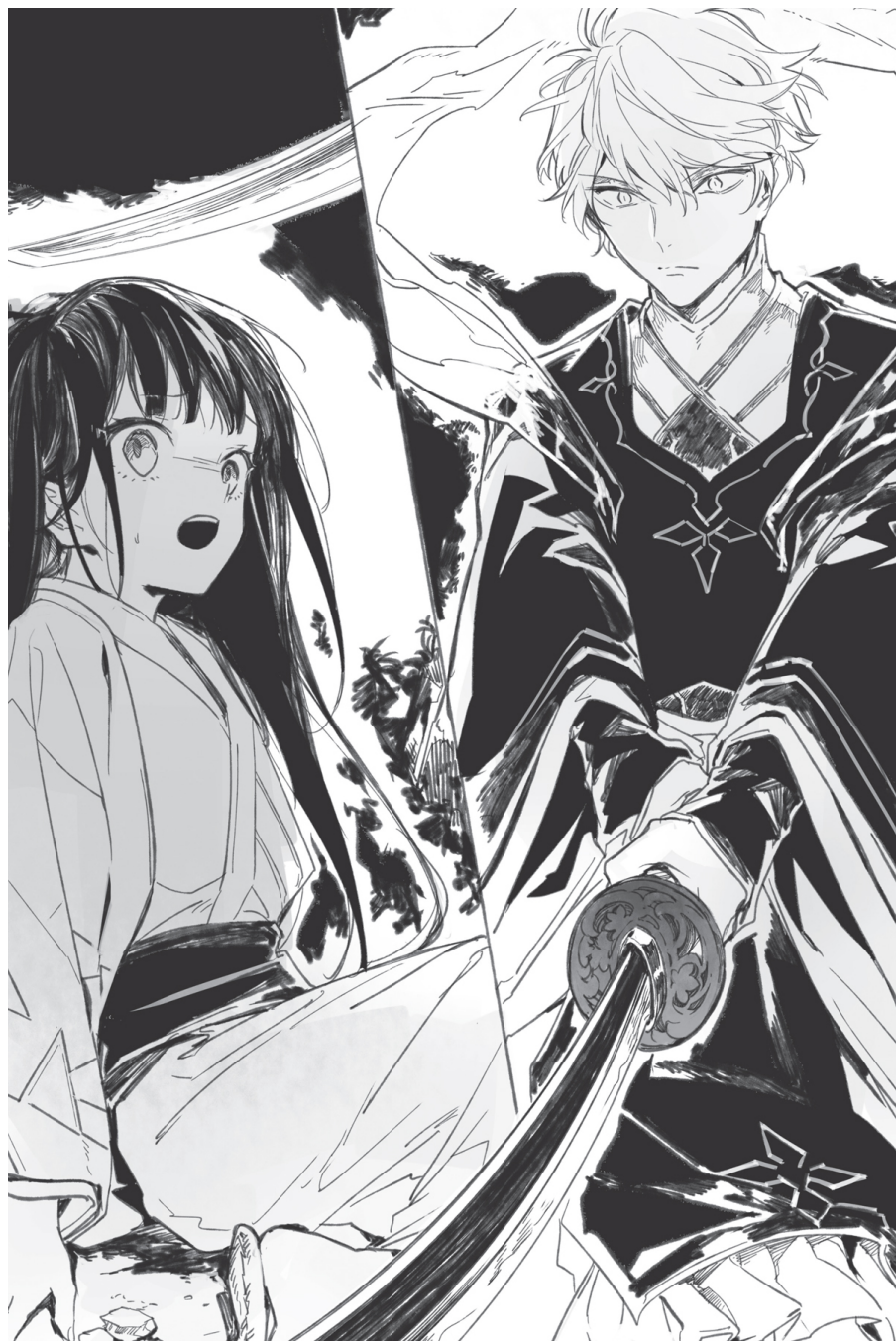
"There shouldn't be any more for a while," the man said as he finished off the final monster and swung the black sword once to flick off the clotted blood. He walked toward Yae, who was still collapsed on the ground, and gave her a frightening smile that suggested he was still in a state of excitement from all the killing. "And now it's your turn to die."

...Huh? Yae couldn't believe her ears. Before she could process what he had said, the man emphatically swung the sword at her head. Rather than splitting her head open, however, it hung just above her forehead as if stopped by an invisible shield. The clattering of the blade was proof of the strength the man was putting into his swing.

Yae blinked multiple times. Her comprehension slowly caught up, and her fear turned to anger and bewilderment. *He tried to kill me!* First the men from Miya Province used her as a decoy, and then the tiger she just freed tried to slice her head off. After all this unfair treatment, she was through being understanding.

“Why...?” she began, intending to ask why everyone put so little value on her life, but the man misinterpreted her question. He lowered his sword as if out of boredom and answered casually.

“It seems like I can’t kill you because of the pact. How annoying.” He stared down at Yae through the bangs of his golden hair, which was even more disheveled than before. His brilliant sunflower-colored eyes shone coldly.



After staring at him in a daze for a few seconds, Yae realized he was surprisingly good-looking. He was tall like the men from Miya Province, but he also had a gorgeous beauty to him. The bridge of his nose was nice and shapely, and his thin lips rested in a gentle smile. If she hadn't just seen him fighting like a savage god of war, she would have been taken by his beauty and elegance, which were worthy of an imperial court.

"My name is Arai. I would rather kill you than serve you, but I am yours," the man said, spitting venom from those delicate lips.

He'd rather what now?! Yae was at a loss for words.

"I was released for your sake. Your life sustains my freedom."

Sustains? What does that mean?

"I can't speak for eternity, but as long as there is light in my eyes, I am your servant," Arai said with a tone of annoyance, ignoring Yae's growing bewilderment. She couldn't believe a word she was hearing; was this some kind of bizarre declaration of love?

"Wh-what are you saying...?" Yae asked, trembling.

"I can't kill you, so clearly I have no choice but to stay by your side."

"Huh?!"

I don't understand. What the heck even is this tiger man?!

"I can imagine no greater humiliation, but I kneel to you in fealty. You'd better not forget it." With an imperious glare that ran totally counter to his actions, he knelt and swore his loyalty.

"I don't understand what you're saying; you clearly have no desire to serve me, and most importantly, that's not what I was asking!!" Yae screamed, crouching down on the ground. She could sense Arai being put off, but she had taken too much abuse and couldn't hold back. "First my foster father, then the men from Miya Province, and now this tiger man... How can my luck with men be this bad?! What did I do to deserve this? Did I make some man cry in my past life? No, that's impossible, I was way too straitlaced!"

"H-huh...?" Clearly uneasy, Arai stooped down in front of Yae. She began to punch the stone path with her fists in frustration. "Hey, don't punch so hard. You'll break your wrists."

"What right do you have to say that?! You just tried to *kill* me! I'm sorry I'm such a dull and boring woman!" Yae yelled.

"I never said that," he responded calmly. So he had some manners after all. Still, his correction did nothing to quell Yae's desire to vent her pent-up emotions.

"I can't tell you how many times people have told me I'm a 'nice person.' I kept getting that right up until my death in my previous life, and it never once felt like praise!"

"I never said that, either."

“They should’ve just been honest with me. Being a ‘nice person’ just meant I was a convenient tool for everyone else. They all felt so lucky to have someone around who was polite and easy to use. Urgh. It wasn’t that I was any nicer than anyone else; I was just afraid of making people hate me! All I ever wanted was to be liked!”

Yae wanted to be like Oshiro, who on top of being good-looking was also able to express her opinion clearly. She wanted to be like the people at college and at her company who naturally drew others to them and made them smile. That was why she said yes whenever someone asked her for a favor, even if it seemed like a pain. She endeavored to do the same even after she was reborn in this world. She always did her best to stay calm and not be a hindrance to anyone else, and she refrained from doing things that might cause trouble for others. If it lessened someone’s burden or earned her a genuine smile, she was happy to do it.

But things never seemed to go quite right. Yae wasn’t really disliked, but...she always felt like a bit of an afterthought. Thinking back, it was always little things that she could write off as her imagination. She was never named first when she was with someone else. She was only ever invited to hang out *after* someone else declined. It was never any worse than that, but the cumulation of being put off ate away at her over time.

“I just want to feel needed by those around me. What’s so wrong with that?!” Yae yelled.

“Hey,” Arai said impatiently, but Yae didn’t stop. She continued to cry, bent down over the cold stone pavement.

“The hardest part of mapmaking is the field surveys. Walking to every single house on my own two feet was so hard and time-consuming. Some people treated me like a prowler, and others complained to me for hours. My boss shoved all the field surveys onto me because I was a ‘hard worker’ and ‘well-mannered’ and therefore perfect for the job, but that wasn’t fair! And if I pushed back, he would just guilt-trip me, saying I chose this job, but I didn’t; that’s not what I wanted!”

Yae knew as she screamed that she was partially at fault for not refusing. But this wasn’t about her self-awareness or lack thereof; she simply wanted to expel all the frustration that had built up in her chest.

“Even my marriage... Chief Kadaru just wanted to use me and have me return to Kaki Province once my role was done. He didn’t think for one second about how hard that would be for me. Do my feelings matter that little? I hate how worthless everyone thinks I am... I didn’t choose to be born Natureless,” Yae said, voice still trembling. But she was steadily calming down.

“Hey,” Arai said again, grabbing Yae’s arm. “Telling me all of this isn’t going to help. There’s nothing I can do.”

What in the world am I doing? Yae thought dimly as he lifted her face. As he said, this wasn’t the time for complaining about her personal problems. She had been overwhelmed by the long, dizzying chain of events and forgot her promise to herself to always stay calm. It had been a mentally traumatic day that seemed to call into question everything she had ever done.

“...Are you really Natureless? ...I certainly don’t smell anything from you,” Arai said, suddenly leaning his head toward her neck. Those words were like a stake through Yae’s heart.

“What does it matter if I’m Natureless? Should I take a scented bath? Would that satisfy you?” Yae snapped, and her tears gushed forth. Arai looked put off again.

Seeing Arai’s face up close made Yae feel even worse. He truly was handsome and seeing her unsightly, tear-stained face reflected in his beautiful eyes was more than she could bear.

“Don’t think I’ll let you get away with doing whatever you please just because you’re handsome and Wild-Natured!” Yae warned, her anger flaring up again as she peered into his face.

His irises each contained a crest of five circles positioned around his pupil in a star shape. The circles spun around his pupils in accordance with his emotions. Moving crests were very rare, and only people with exceptional divine power had them. Yae had heard that some moving crests had bird, butterfly, or star shapes, but she had never seen one until now.

“So you were dumped by a Wild-Natured man... Oh yeah, there was talk of you being married off to a man in another province,” Arai muttered as if just recalling it.

“...How do you know that?” Yae asked.

Arai made an exasperated expression and didn’t answer her question. “That marriage never would have worked out. A Wild-Natured man would never fall for a Natureless woman.”

Yae knew that, but it upset her to hear it said so matter-of-factly.

“I’m not marrying you, so I couldn’t care less about your Nature,” he said with total disinterest. He brushed his unruly bangs aside in annoyance and pulled Yae forcefully to her feet. “Whatever happens, you’re my life. Let’s get moving.”

Arai started to walk without waiting for Yae’s response.

III A Dream of Shifting Water and Words

Perhaps due to having driven Lady Bihin back into the stone monument, it was shockingly easy to return to the regular world. All they had to do was pass by the giant crimson pillar, just as they had done earlier. The scenery changed completely, and they wound up right back where they had been before Yae performed the ceremony.

Where will I live now? As Yae thought about her future, she sank into her worries like sinking into a swamp. She had declared to Kadaru that she would return home the moment the men from Miya Province rejected her, but they didn't just reject her, they *left her to die*.

Yae's pride was too strong to just return as if nothing had happened after being judged worthless. Marching carelessly back into the village would also cause problems for Kadaru, given his position. If she had simply gone and come back, perhaps after a divorce, he might have been able to use the situation to his advantage in future negotiations. But if it came to light that the people of Miya Province had left a marriage candidate for dead, and that candidate happened to be the chief's daughter, even if not by blood, Kadaru would be forced to ask for some kind of compensation.

I can't just go back. I can't... The main purpose behind this exchange was to bring solidarity between the two provinces. Yae's very existence could cause fissures in the other marriages. Kadaru would almost certainly prefer she stay dead. In that case, the men from Miya Province would be able to claim that they had tried to save her, but unfortunately, she was killed during the attack. The truth didn't matter.

Yae felt new woes piling up in her heart like thick dust; it was suffocating. Just as in her previous life, she was an afterthought whom nobody wanted around. She wasn't good enough for anybody. *I thought I was going to make things better this time.*

Arai led the silent Yae behind him as he walked skillfully through

the mountain. The world had been shrouded in a dim light during the ceremony, but the sun shone brightly now that they had returned to the normal world. Yae's eyes were overwhelmed by the light after such a long time in the darkness.

Arai was purposefully hiking through the trees, but he wasn't heading for Kaki Province or for Miya Province. Two butterflies flew past them, circling each other in perfect harmony. Yae wondered if they were the same ones she had seen before. Perhaps because he noticed Yae absentmindedly gazing at them, Arai stopped and stood for a moment. But he resumed walking again almost immediately.

Eventually, the path grew rough and difficult for a woman to traverse, at which point Arai transformed into a large golden tiger, let Yae onto his back, and began to leap easily across the terrain. Yae was tasked with holding the black sword while Arai was in tiger form. It seemed as though they were cutting across Mount Yagi toward Mount Saeba, which was located on the opposite side from Mount Mebiro. Yae didn't really feel like talking, but she had begun to wonder about their destination, so she relented and asked.

"Where are we going?"

"There's a spring this way."

That wasn't really an answer, and it only increased Yae's discomfort.

After a little while longer, they arrived at a spring, just like Arai had said. The clear water reflected the sky, giving it a light-blue color, and a few thick, fallen trunks spanned the water, forming a sort of bridge. Just to the side of the bridge, a mystery in the shape of a large bowl was embedded sideways into the bottom of the spring. About half of it was underwater. The inside of the bowl was vermilion, and the outside was the dark-brown color of burned tea leaves. It looked like it might originally have been patterned with golden origami cranes, but they had been all but worn away.

"I'm going to wash my sword," the golden tiger said, dropping Yae off by the bank of the spring and reassuming his human form. He walked briskly along the fallen trunks bridging the water, then stopped about halfway...that is, directly in front of the bowl, and crouched. A green frog that had been resting nearby fled into the spring.

Yae waited a moment before she followed him onto the bridge, then sat down and hugged her knees. The giant bowl was deep, and the rim of its upper half draped over them like an awning.

It feels like we're sitting on a bench at a bus stop. Yae remembered her days taking the bus as a high schooler and tapped her feet restlessly. Her unruly emotions steadily calmed down and were replaced by intense embarrassment. She had gone on a tirade in front

of a man she had just met, shouting things he must have found incomprehensible. He probably thought she was insane. That's what Yae would think if someone did that to her.

Unaware of the conflict raging in Yae's mind, Arai unsheathed the black sword and dipped the naked blade into the water to begin washing it.

"A-are you sure it's okay to wash it that way?!" Yae asked, startled. Arai's actions ran totally counter to what she considered common sense.

"What sword could bathe itself in blood if it feared a little water?" Arai responded coldly with a quick glance at Yae.

That really wasn't what she had been getting at. *It must be a special kind of sword*, Yae convinced herself.

"...Can I ask you some questions?" she ventured quietly once she had collected herself.

"About what, exactly?"

Yae was surprised; she had expected him to refuse.

"Were you Lady Bihin's retainer or something like that?"

Arai had been sealed inside that dirty gray monument with Lady Bihin. That made Yae think he might have been a relative of hers or have some kind of special connection, but Arai turned to her with anger in his eyes.

"Huh?! Me, a retainer?! Don't be absurd," he spat furiously, swinging the blade to shake off the water and sheathing it. He plopped down roughly next to Yae, holding the sword in one hand. His violent motions shook the entire log beneath them.

Whoa, why is he sitting so close? He's practically on top of me, Yae thought, flustered. Come to think of it, the black sword always clattered as soon as she left its side. It seemed to want to be next to her. Maybe that was a trait inherited from its owner.

"I told you I'm yours now, didn't I? If I serve anyone, it's you," he corrected matter-of-factly, and Yae regained her composure.

"Uh. You said that earlier, but I have no idea what you mean." On that note, she didn't understand anything about what was going on. She had so many questions. "What exactly are you, Arai?"

That was the question she wanted answered the most. It was a serious question, but he responded with a blank "No idea."

"I'm not lying. I don't really know what I am. I might already be a shade... No, I'm closer to a fallen god." He sounded totally unconcerned despite talking about himself.

There wasn't a firm definition for what a fallen god was. If a shade came to be worshipped or enshrined, it would be treated as a fallen god, and strange beings the true nature of which no one understood were often called that as well. To Yae, a fallen god was anything that

humans couldn't handle and that needed to be sealed away.

"...But you still have your sense of self, don't you?" Yae asked.

"For now," Arai answered suggestively, turning to stare at her. "I've lost the greater part of myself, which has caused my true nature to warp considerably, but I do at least remember my name. Given that and my strong divine power, I figure I was probably a type of god."

"H-huh...," Yae said, having no idea what to say beyond that. He made potentially being a god sound so trivial.

"You're the one who woke me. Don't act like it's not your problem."

"Huh... Wait, what?" What did he mean by that? Yae was taken aback.

"Who do you think has been protecting you all this time? If not for me, you would have been eaten by some fallen god long ago."

"I awoke you?!"

"You were so hopeless, always flubbing your lines and marching with your shoes still on..."

"Are you talking about when I performed ceremonies?" Flabbergasted, Yae bent toward Arai. "Hold on, are you also Lord Kuroashi?"

"Yes. He was a part of me," Arai confirmed nonchalantly, and Yae fell silent. Kuroashi had begun appearing to her after she became the envoy for the ceremony.

"The golden tiger that was sealed in the monument is your true elebeast form, right?"

"Yep."

"Does that make Lord Kuroashi a 'shadow' of your golden tiger form or something like that?"

Kuroashi didn't have a shadow. If he was a "part" of Arai, that made Yae wonder if Kuroashi himself might have been the golden tiger's shadow, separated from its owner.

"Well, it's something like that, so sure, you can think of it that way," Arai said, not giving her a clear answer.

"Why did you—er, a part of you, I guess... Why did Lord Kuroashi appear before me?"

That question seemed to make Arai tense up. Yae could feel a cold malice like the time he swung his sword at her head, and she gulped. *Are his attempts to murder me and Lord Kuroashi's appearance related?* She couldn't bring herself to ask the question. He quickly suppressed his killing intent and offered a strained smile, but Yae was certain repeating the question would only provoke him again.

"...Is that sword also a part of you?" she asked to distract herself from the fear blooming in her chest.

"In a way, yes, but technically, it's more of a possession," he

answered. A possession with a will of its own.

“...What about Lady Bihin?”

“Don’t you dare lump us together. That *thing* has nothing to do with me.” That was a relief to hear. Yae was really glad he had rejected that possibility. “I think... Whatever I was drifted here from another place like the mysteriums. I was probably worshipped somewhere,” Arai said carefully. Yae’s mind began to race as she watched him.

I don’t know if this world is the distant future or a slightly different dimension or what, but there’s no doubt that both Arai and the mysteriums came from Japan. The giant crimson pillar in front of the place he was sealed was definitely the remnants of a torii. That would make Arai most likely an enshrined deity from somewhere in Japan.

He must have been a god of especially high rank, judging by the heavenly garment around his shoulders... The sword had to be the divine sword offered to him at the shrine. *It was, in fact, the weapon of a god...* Yae shuddered internally. No wonder it had a will of its own.

“That monster probably had some connection to me, too, but whatever that was and whatever it meant has been lost for good,” he said.

“...A mythical connection,” Yae muttered absentmindedly.

“Hmm?” Arai responded, looking slightly impressed. “You wouldn’t think it, given your unruly hair and lack of a Nature, but you catch on surprisingly quick.”

“Watch it, tiger man.”

“That monster has lost herself over time just like I have. Whoever I was, I was definitely meant to seal her or suppress her. But not too long ago, that red pillar was broken, and I was released into this world and set free for a little while.”

That was new information. Yae listened closely.

“Naturally, releasing me released that monster as well. I drove her back every time she attacked, and eventually, the people around here tried to set me up as this country’s Great Protector. I chased them away because I wanted no part of that annoying job, and then some idiots with divine power in their Natures sealed me and that monster together in the stone monument. I’ll kill them all.”

Yae pretended she didn’t hear that last part and quickly asked another question.

“So you’ve been released before... Was that before I was born?”

“A little further back. About a hundred years ago, I think.”

That was hardly “not long ago.” That was on the scale of legends.

Yae processed everything he had told her as she watched insects resembling pond skaters slide across the surface of the water. She felt like she had gotten a rough grasp on who and what Arai was. She

thought his connection to Lady Bihin might be similar to that of Susanoo and Yamata-no-Orochi. That would put the black sword in the role of Ama-no-Murakumo-no-Tsurugi. *But I don't think he's the god from that myth. I get the feeling his myth is much more terrifying.*

Yae wasn't too familiar with Japanese mythology. If she had known she was going to end up in a situation like this, she would have made sure to read the *Kojiki* in her previous life.

"Did you destroy Lady Bihin with that sword?" Yae asked.

"For now," Arai answered, his expression remaining dark. "There's one thing I don't get, though... What made all those shades appear so suddenly?"

"Oh yeah, how did you realize I was about to be killed by that shade?"

Technically, it was Kuroashi who had come to save her, but since he was a piece of Arai, it was probably fine to assume it was of his volition.

"Of course I know when you're in danger. You are my life, after all."

There he went saying that again. Yae frowned. *There are still so many things I don't understand...*

What happened to Kuroashi's injury? Why did the black sword, which was likely a divine sword, appear before Yae after the ceremony? She didn't know what he meant by the "you are my life" thing, but how *did* he know exactly where she was when she was captured by the shade? Also, why did he make her perform the ceremony rite back there? Why did he try to kill her...? She didn't know where the procession of monsters came from, either.

"...Lord Kuroashi had a wound on his back. Was that the same one Lady Bihin inflicted during the Kaizaka March I performed two moons ago?" she said, asking indirectly if he was okay. Arai observed her.

"I've been trapped inside that monster all this time, and she stole my sword as well. But over time, the ceremony reduced her strength, which in turn cleared my impurity," he said.

"I did notice Lord Kuroashi's eyes become clearer over the years."

"She probably tried to kill me because she grew anxious about our reversal in strength."

That makes sense, Yae thought. But it still didn't sit right with her. She felt like he had glossed over something.

"This is my sword, though, and there's no way it could kill me. Luckily, I was able to retrieve it from her, but existing as what you call Kuroashi became more difficult. I needed to rest until my wound healed," Arai explained.

"That's why you temporarily gave me the sword?" Yae asked.

“What other reason would I have?” he responded evenly. Yae felt the strength leave her body.

“Why did you make me imitate the ceremony back there?” She didn’t know why the black sword had appeared in the corpse of the shade that had captured her, either.

“You sure ask a lot of questions... This is all your fault for leaving my sword behind in the first place,” he responded, splashing the tip of the sword in the water... Was it really okay to treat a sword like that? “I thought entrusting it to you would be a good way to get the rust off, but that monster found it and stole it again when you didn’t take it with you.”

“Wait, what?! The sword was stolen?!” Yae exclaimed. Arai nodded with a condemning look.

“I don’t know why, but there are a lot more shades appearing around here all of a sudden. She used some and had them steal my sword from your house.”

“I had no idea...” Yae was shocked. *So the shade that captured me wasn’t there by coincidence? Was it on its way back from stealing the sword?* Maybe Kuroashi showed up because he was following the sword, not because he knew she was in danger.

“Um, so. Do I have this right? Your power dynamic was about to flip after many years of performing the Kaizaka March, so Lady Bihin tried to kill Lord Kuroashi to chip away at your strength. Lord Kuroashi fought back and succeeded at retrieving the sword. You gave it to me, but it was stolen again. So you came to get it back...?”

“That’s right. I don’t know why, but she’s starting to regain her strength again due to the increase in shades. You saw all the monsters gathering around the monument, right?”

“*That’s* why all those monsters were there!”

“I made you perform the ceremony to release me before she regained her full strength.”

“...I see.”

Yae understood the gist of what had happened and had the answers to several things that had been puzzling her. The picture was still fuzzy, though; there was much that remained unresolved. *It seems like he really doesn’t know what’s causing the increase in shades. But why did he appear to me for all those years as Lord Kuroashi? And why did he try to kill me after I performed the ceremony?*

Before all of those, however, was the mystery of why Lady Bihin always paraded around Kaki Province with the black sword in hand during the Kaizaka March. Speaking of which, did Arai say that he *hadn’t* completely eradicated her? He had yet to answer any of those questions. He was clearly dodging them.

“Do you understand now? You released my true body. That makes

me yours, no matter how unhappy I am with the situation. Serving you is my current purpose in life,” Arai declared.

“...You’re free to live however you want. You don’t have to be mine, whatever that means,” Yae protested. She knew he wasn’t doing this to repay a debt. That much was clear.

“Don’t take away my life’s purpose. I may have just woken up, but you’ll regret it if you don’t take me seriously.”

Yae opened her mouth to say that was a ridiculous demand but held her tongue.

“Yae.”

She had been lost in thought and almost fell off the trunk when she suddenly heard him call her name. Arai grabbed her arm and saved her from an involuntary bath.

“How do you know my name?” she asked clumsily, using a hand to hold down her disheveled hair. Arai frowned. His hair was frizzy, too, if not as bad as Yae’s. That made his eyes hard to see, but she could still clearly tell he was sulking.

“Do you seriously have to ask that? My black sword was always at your side. I spent more than enough time around you as Kuroashi, too. I’ve even seen your scrawny naked body.”

“No way,” Yae muttered in shock. She was still at a developing age—calling her scrawny was totally unfair.

“That reminds me, you had a habit of getting real handsy with me when I was in tiger form... No, wait, that’s not what I wanted to talk about. Why have you been calling that monster Bihin?”

This man was really rude.

“Because the giant crimson pillar at the beginning—and end—of the ceremony has *Bihin* carved into it. Though the characters have faded and can’t be read anymore. Is that not her name?” Yae asked. She drew the characters in midair, and Arai held his breath and stared into the distance. After some time, he laughed.

“Sounds like someone misread. Those characters didn’t say Bihin.”

“What did they say, then?”

“Himogari. That’s the word that was carved into the pillar. The characters look very similar,” Arai said definitively.

Yae reached out a hand and brushed his thick bangs away from his eyes. Eyes were mirrors into a person’s soul, and it was much easier to tell what someone was thinking when you could see them. Arai tilted his head curiously, but he let her do as she pleased without any sign of annoyance.

“Hi-mo-ga-ri? ...*Mogari* is the word for the place an important person’s dead body would be stored temporarily before burial, back in ancient times. Isn’t that right?”

Yae knew that word because of an old burial ground that was

discovered in her hometown in Japan. She had visited the ruins on field trips as a kid.

"That's right. It's not a name; it's a word to describe what she is."

"...You know what? I don't want to hear any more. I'm getting a bad feeling about this," Yae said firmly, and Arai smiled. She was charmed by his unexpectedly cute expression.

"Hold on, I'm not done. She was a divine being from the land of the dead. Similar to me, but also different."

"I told you I don't want to hear it, Mr. Tiger."

"The purpose behind carving *Himogari* into the pillar was so that no one would forget who she was," Arai finished, staring at Yae with the smile still on his face.

"...May I ask you something? Did you carve those characters on the pillar?" she asked, making an effort to be polite. He nodded right away. *Oh yeah, he said earlier that he was the one who drove Lady Bihin away!* Yae put her fingers to her temples, deep in thought. He had said so many other shocking things that she must have let that one slip by.

"Yae, I don't want my soul to transform completely like hers."

"Huh." She wanted to look away, but his strange, intimidating air locked her in place.

"Drifting here from somewhere else is essentially the same as being reborn in this world. But if a soul drifts here without the divine protection of the karmic cycle, it ends up getting warped."

Did he mean that because, unlike an uroko, he had come to this world unexpectedly, his soul had been distorted immediately after he arrived?

"Even the black sword was bigger and longer in my last life. It was so large that ten people were needed to hold it."

"Ten people?!"

She felt like she had heard of a sword like that somewhere before, but she couldn't quite remember.

"That's why I have a great, urgent need for someone to bind me and keep me from losing myself," Arai said with a broad grin. Yae backed up from him a little, and he leaned his face toward hers. "You just drew characters in the air, didn't you, Yae?"

"Uh, did I do that?"

"You must have come from the same world as me. There's no way you would be able to draw kanji so easily otherwise."

...*Crap*. There were plenty of other uroko who could write simple kanji, but the characters in *Bihin* were way too rare and complicated for just anyone to be able to recall off the top of their head.

"Your soul isn't warped. It's smooth, as if polished by clear water. You're definitely an uroko brought here by the wheel of fate, but unlike the others, you've retained your memories, haven't you? That's

why you know kanji that are rare in this world.”

Yae tried to slide away from him, but he followed her and peered into her face. The circles of his ring crest spun energetically in his sunflower-colored irises.

“On the topic of memories... I don’t know much about myself, but there are things I do remember,” Arai said. He rested the black sword on Yae’s lap and tapped the hilt lightly. “I have siblings.”

“Really...? How many?” Yae asked.

“I don’t remember exactly. It could’ve been two, four, six...eight, maybe? No, it was ten. Or was it twenty?”

“Whoa now, how high is that number going to climb?” It seemed like he might go on indefinitely. After calling his joke, Yae frowned disapprovingly. Arai was probably just trying to get her attention and keep her from running away from him.

“*Sibling* might not be right. Maybe *spiritual family* is closer, or *blood relative*...?”

Yae looked away from the muttering Arai and flicked the center of the black sword. *Sometimes I can’t tell if your master is smart or a bit of an airhead*, she thought. It rattled violently in her lap. *Goodness, why is this sword so scary?*

“Anyway, I only remember one of them clearly,” Arai said, glaring at her as if telling her not to play with his sword. She wished he would teach his pet some manners. “My younger brother Sui. He was taken away when I was sealed. They were probably afraid he would break me out.”

“Are you saying your brother is sealed somewhere else?” Yae asked.

Arai patted her on the head. Her hair was already like seaweed, and now he was messing it up even more—how rude.

“Just so you know, my brother isn’t like me. He’s delicate. He has a heart as gentle as moonlight. He’s been sealed for a long time, so it’s likely his soul’s transformation has progressed further than mine.”

“...Does he have deformation?”

“This world is funny, isn’t it? Whether you’re a divine being, an object, or a flower, we all catch disease the same,” he said self-deprecatingly, and then he turned to Yae. The circles in his eyes were moving back and forth like pendulums. “This world is like the dawn. Things haven’t become fixed yet, which makes them prone to change.”

Yae thought about that. She wondered if he meant *dawn* like a beginning, before the day had begun, or like an end, the time after the night was already over. She couldn’t help but think it was the latter.

“I’d like to meet your brother,” she said sympathetically to shake off that grisly thought. Arai’s lips curled into a smile.

“I’d like to see him, too. Yeah, that’s a great idea. I’ll introduce

you to him.”

“...Huh?”

Arai whispered softly to the frightened Yae. “You are my life. And conveniently, you know how to perform ceremonies.”

“No, I don’t. I just do what I’m told—”

“Find a way to free my brother like you did me. His soul has likely transformed to some extent, but we might still be able to save him if we start now.”

“Like I have any idea how to do that!”

“If you successfully save my brother, I’ll return you to Kaki Province.”

Yae froze for a moment, then relaxed and smiled awkwardly. “It would be great if I could save your brother...but that offer isn’t going to tempt me. I’m not planning on returning to Kaki Province anytime soon.”

The truth was that she *couldn’t* return. Arai smiled with a mysterious look in his eyes, as if he sensed the tangled feelings in Yae’s heart.

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll take responsibility and make sure you have no problems living there.”

“How?”

“I’ll kill everyone in the village,” he declared, smiling boastfully as if it were a brilliant idea. Did this mad tiger want to make her into one of the greatest villains in history? “We might as well kill all the people in Miya Province while we’re at it. Those men left you to die, right?”

“I’m not mad enough about it to want you to *kill all of them*,” Yae responded immediately. It wasn’t every day someone asked you about slaughtering a whole village as casually as if they were asking you out for lunch. Even his sword was clattering violently in her lap as if saying “Let’s make heads fly!” She really wished it would stop.

“Oh, come on, I’d mostly be doing it for myself, so don’t worry about it. The people who sealed me a century ago were from Miya Province, too,” Arai admitted.

“You need to create more of a mood before you confess heavy stuff like that! Stop smiling. And the answer is still no.” Yae shook her head, and Arai looked at her quizzically.

“Why are you stopping me? Weren’t you just yelling about how hard and painful all that was for you?”

He just had to dredge up the moment she was trying hardest to forget. What a demon.

“A Wild Nature was forced upon me when I drifted to this world. I find you dull and uninteresting as a Natureless woman, too.”

“Way to make me feel better.” She glared, and Arai crossed his

arms and reclined confidently.

“But I’m not looking for you to be interesting or have luck with men. You mean something to me, so I couldn’t care less about your Nature.”

Yae did wish he would stop hitting her with surprise kindness like that right after putting her down; this seesaw business wasn’t easy on the heart for a simple girl starved for kindness. There was one thing she couldn’t allow herself to forget, though: This man had swung his blade at her head with all his might.

“Does my Nature not matter to you because you’re planning to kill me?” Yae hadn’t meant to give him a biting retort like that, but it escaped her mouth thoughtlessly. She regretted it immediately. The surprise in Arai’s gaze was palpable. She might as well go ahead and ask another question. Yae gripped the black sword with sweaty hands and opened her mouth again.

“Why did you save me as Lord Kuroashi and then try to kill me after I released you from the stone monument?” Her theory was that she had served her purpose when she released his real body. She stroked the black sword and prayed she was wrong.

“...Why does it matter? I wasn’t able to kill you in the end,” he answered. That wasn’t the answer Yae wanted. She was too afraid to look up and see what kind of expression he was wearing. “You’re the one who’s been singing ‘serve me, serve me,’ for all these years. You have a responsibility toward me.”

Yae was startled. She looked up reflexively and saw he was smiling wickedly. Arai still hadn’t opened up to her at all. His eyes were cold and conveyed that he was only here with her because of some specific reason.

“‘By the earth and by the heavens, I offer my body to you. So even if we’re separated, obey and kneel to me for all eternity.’ You’ve been demanding that from me for years. And you know what, I’ll grant your damn wish. How can I turn down someone saying they want me so passionately?!” Arai said.

“No, that wasn’t my intention,” Yae protested.

Arai ignored her objection, grabbed the black sword, and jumped nimbly up to his feet. He looked down coldly at a flustered Yae. “How should I know that? It’s your fault for playing with my heart. All right, let’s wake my brother.”

He abruptly ended the conversation and drew the sword from its scabbard. Yae had opened her mouth to explain herself, but she fell silent when she saw the brilliant shine of the black blade. *He didn’t come to this spring to rest. Saving his brother was the goal all along.*

Arai held the sword in both hands and swung it down at the surface of the water as if striking an invisible enemy. The scenery

around them shifted immediately. Actually, they were in the same place, but now the spring was empty. The dry earth at the bottom was exposed, making it look like a moon crater. Yae and Arai were still standing on the log bridge, which remained as before, over the now-dry spring.

The area was shrouded in a blue darkness. The sunlight through the trees, the singing of the birds, and the butterflies that had been dancing above the flowers were all gone. Everything looked very similar to how it did when Yae performed ceremonies. It was as if the dimension had shifted just a fingerbreadth.

“Yae, my brother is down there.” Arai pointed to the bottom of the crater that had been the spring. It was full of minerals that looked like bismuth crystals. Most of them shone a brilliant, mystical blue, and they gave off an elegant rainbow light depending on the angle. They differed in size and shape, but they all contained insects, fish, and animal skeletons. They reminded Yae of insects preserved in amber.

“Is one of these your brother...?” Yae asked as she wondered at the beauty of the minerals. They scaled the crater like the terraced fields in Kaki Province. Arai nodded, then picked Yae up and jumped down into the spring.

Some of the minerals were as tall as Yae, and some didn’t even reach a meter in height.

“March, Yae.”

Arai pushed Yae lightly in the back, snapping her out of her enchantment at the formations’ glossy blue finish and causing her to stumble forward.

“What do you mean, ‘march’...?”

“This is no different from a ceremony. Go on.”

He made it sound simple, but she didn’t have any idea what kind of song she should sing.

“I told you my brother’s soul is being eaten away by deformation, right? Well, he’s sealed, too. That means we need to wake him up and release him first. Sing something violent; make it sound like you’re threatening to chop his head off,” Arai said, puffing out his chest.

Weren’t we trying to save him...?

Yae walked timidly among the geometrical crystals, looking back at Arai over and over. It almost felt like she was exploring an ancient ruin. She happened upon a long and narrow stick—it, too, was shining with a beautiful silver-blue light—and picked it up and began to think.

“Hurry up. My divine power can’t keep this air distorted forever,” Arai urged her from behind.

He probably created this atmosphere to make it easier to perform

the incantation, but... *Ooh, I don't have any idea what to do. I have to try something, though.*

Yae decided to use the stick as a ceremonial tool and lifted it overhead. The Kaizaka March was far from the only ceremony Yae had served as envoy for. Natureless people rarely got sick and were resistant to miasma, which made her perfect for the job. Many of those ceremonies required her to march and sing.

"Hi-fu-mi-yo."

Yae took a large stride with each syllable she sang.

"I-mu-na-ya-ko-to."

She passed between the minerals as she marched.

"E-ri-u-chi-i-ka-ke-yo."

Most of the ceremonies in this world were performed to exorcize evil spirits.

"Hi-fu-mi-yo-i-mu-na-ya-ko-to, let us take up swords and find our foe."

Yae was singing an incantation used at ceremonies called the "Hifumi Warning." It was used to calm and expunge evil presences.

"By night, we sing their evil name, we choose our words to strike and maim."

The insects, fish, and animal skeletons began to stir inside the minerals as she sang. *Oh, it's working.* A giant dragonfly leaped out of its mineral and flew through the air, shining blue like a star. Next, a fish emerged and began to swim around Yae. Then a goat skeleton freed itself and pranced lightly in the air. The sight was at once beautiful and ominous. They were followed by a wasp, a grasshopper, a shark, a crocodile, a horse, and a bird, all shining as they flew through the blue darkness without a sound.

"Hi-fu-mi-yo i-mu-na ya-ko-to. Hi-fu-mi yo-i-mu na-ya-ko-to."

The incantation changed as she marched around the crater. It shifted and crumbled, and the words were rearranged.

"Imukotohito uchitori yomiya kaerikomu kakeutanari..."

New words came to her mind unbidden as she sang.

"Detested outsider we shall behead, and sing one to another in festive song."

Just as Arai wanted, Yae was shaking awake his brother's sleeping soul by threatening to chop his head off. She gave all her attention to the song as she marched through the giant minerals. Eventually, she noticed the creatures that had been lighting up the sky like stars were gone, and all that remained was the skeleton of a four-legged beast in front of her.

"Accept my prayer. Speak thy name."

The rearranged lyrics emerged from Yae's mouth seemingly on their own. They had an immediate effect—the skeleton before her

glittered brightly and grew flesh and blood. It was a tiger with white fur. Though its color was different, it looked a lot like Arai's beast form. It had faint stripes and gave off a mystical aura. The pattern on its forehead looked like Siddham script, and there was dark shading around its silver eyes.

"Thank you for waking me. I am Sui. That is the name my brother gave me in this land after my real name was shaved from my soul. To think I almost lost that as well..." the divine tiger said, shaking its head to throw off the last of the sparkles.

Is it okay for me to respond to him normally? Yae turned back toward Arai to let him make the decision, and in that moment, the surrounding area returned to its normal state.

"Huh?! *Gack...*"

Naturally, that meant the spring was full once again. Yae panicked as she was suddenly enveloped by water. The white tiger grabbed her sash in his mouth and dragged her to the surface as she struggled. He jumped out of the water with a splash and landed on the bank of the spring with Yae in tow. His ears pressed back against his head, he looked at her with concern as she coughed violently.

Arai, who had apparently fled to the bank of the spring alone, walked toward them and grabbed the stick that Yae had forgotten she was holding. It immediately transformed into a white sword. Aside from the color, it closely resembled Arai's black sword.

"How is he, Yae? Is my brother's soul okay?" he asked impatiently, showing no concern for the soaking wet Yae, who had just caught her breath.

So that's the thanks I get, huh...? Yae thought, her shoulders drooping. She formed a window using the fingers from both hands and directed it at the white tiger who had called himself Sui. This was a simple charm that showed a thing's true nature and a basic technique to tell when a monster was disguising itself.

The window showed a man with silver hair that reached his shoulders. His silver eyes were clear as melted snow, and the ring crest in each iris looked like four circles arranged in the shape of a plus sign around his pupil. His physique was almost identical to Arai's, but his face was a little tougher and more masculine than his brother's. That made him somewhat intimidating, but his expression was gentle. His clothes were also the same as Arai's, except for the color and the lack of a heavenly garment around his shoulders.

"How do I look? Is my soul deformed?" the silver-haired man—Sui—asked pleasantly, but with a hint of unease in his voice. Yae lowered the window and looked at him directly. The white tiger rustled his whiskers and transformed into the young man she had seen through her finger window.

“...You look fine. There’s no distortion on your soul,” she answered.

“Really? That’s good to hear,” Sui said, his smile growing wider.

“So we made it in time.” Arai grinned broadly as well and handed the white sword to his brother. It must have been Sui’s sword.

“Your name is Yae, correct?” Sui asked kindly, looking from her to Arai. “You have allowed me to temporarily regain my sanity. You have my thanks.”

“No, it was nothing. I only did what Arai asked me to,” Yae responded, feeling flustered by his warm gaze. *Wow, he’s nice. I can’t believe he’s Arai’s brother.* Both of these tiger brothers had personalities that ran counter to their looks. Arai looked kind at first glance but was actually rude-mannered, and Sui had cold features but a gentle personality. “Um, what do you mean by ‘temporarily’?”

Sui looked down and smiled in response to Yae’s question. “It is likely too late for me. One charm isn’t going to be enough to stop my body’s deformation. I am going to lose my sanity again soon...and I will attack anyone in sight once that happens. I am glad I was able to see my brother again, but you should both flee as fast as you can,” he explained sadly, glancing at the displeased Arai. “You were sealed before me, I believe... Did Yae free you?”

“I became the target of a ceremony, and this girl chanted a curse at me every single year,” Arai answered.

“A curse? ...Not a hymn?” Sui inquired with confusion, and Arai smiled sardonically.

“No, it was a curse. A strong one that demanded obedience.”

Both brothers looked at Yae. Their expressions were unreadable.

“N-no, I don’t know anything about that. I only sang the words I was taught after being chosen as the envoy. It was never my intention to make Arai serve me... I never even had a good idea of what the ceremony was for,” Yae explained falteringly, breaking under the tense atmosphere. They both exhaled and smiled awkwardly.



“...Well anyway, so she was demanding that I obey her over and over, right? Who does she think she is, commanding me to serve a weak human like her? It pissed me off. And to make matters worse, she wants the agreement to last for all eternity. How arrogant can you get?” Arai ranted. It could have just been the shadow, but his eyes looked slightly clouded through his thick bangs.

Yae felt overwhelmed by the force of his words and gaze. *Wait a minute. I think I just got an idea of why Arai swung his sword at me. The Kaizaka March probably originated when Arai and Lady Bihin were sealed away...* In fact, Yae had heard that the ceremony began close to one hundred years ago. If Arai truly was some kind of deity, it made sense that he got angry at having lowly humans demanding every year that he serve them forever. Not to mention how he ended up being sealed away in the first place. Yae had never had the slightest intention of making him serve her, but ignorance didn't absolve the sin.

“But I can't deny that her curse did steadily cleanse my body of impurity and halt my deformation,” Arai said, stooping over. His mood suddenly changed, and he stared at Yae's drenched hair. Yae was sure he was thinking about how much it looked like seaweed.

“Ah, I see. Yae's repetition of this demand brought your existence into focus and purified you,” Sui remarked as if comprehension had dawned on him. “She certainly seems to possess a special soul. Even if it's only temporary, she was able to pause my corruption and return me to myself. Does she have a Blessed Nature like me? ...No, that doesn't fit. I don't feel any divine power from her.”

“She's Natureless.”

What right did Arai have to tell other people about her Nature like that?

“Interesting. Natureless souls are rare as well. That would explain why I don't smell anything from you,” Sui said in astonishment. “But even accounting for that, your soul is unique.” He strained his eyes as if appraising the soul inside her. The circles of his ring crest spun around in his eyes.

Many Blessed Natures had divine power, so they were often well-versed in strange anomalies and divine spirits. Yae's retention of her old memories might have had some effect on her soul.

“If you're Arai's brother, does that make you a god, too...if I may ask?” Yae inquired of Sui.

“Most likely, but that is now in the distant past,” he answered ambiguously. “Right now, I am the person who Arai named Sui. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“But...” She wondered if he had no lingering attachment to his old self. The question had almost left her mouth when she felt a sudden blast of cold air and sneezed. It was summer, but it was chilly on the

mountain. She was also soaked from being submerged in the spring, and her wet clothes were robbing her body of its warmth. The tiger brothers were completely dry.

"Oh, we can't have that... Take off your clothes and wear this," Sui said kindly, taking off his robe and handing it to Yae.

The people of this world wore undergarments beneath their long robes, like the white slip a person would wear beneath a kimono. In the summer, some people wore thin short-sleeved or sleeveless varieties. Sometimes men even went without undergarments under their robes. Sui was wearing the sleeveless variety. Feeling embarrassed and overly conscious of his body, Yae averted her eyes. His face looked more manly than Arai's, but he still had a handsome and youthful physique.

"It's okay, my clothes will dry before long," Yae declined, returning the robe to him. The people of this area—or more specifically, the people from Kaki Province—preferred to wear thick clothing. Aside from visits to watering holes, people didn't show a lot of skin even in the summer.

The reason both men and women wore long robes was to protect their skin. The plants and animals of this world were large and rugged. In spring and summer when vegetation grew tall, people would often get cuts just from wading through underbrush. The memories of her previous life often left Yae bewildered by their size. She once encountered a dog in the mountains as big as a lion and couldn't help screaming out in terror. The chickens raised as livestock in the village were easily twice as big as in her old world. Even their eggs were enormous.

"...No, that won't do. A woman's body is delicate. I insist you wear it," Sui urged.

Yae looked at him again as he approached and gave a start at what she saw. She hadn't noticed it before because she had immediately looked away, but there was some sort of bruise visible on his chest just above the collar of his undergarment. She peered at it without thinking to get a better look, and Sui quickly adjusted his collar and smiled awkwardly.

"Don't stare, you perv," Arai accused with a disgusted look, slapping her lightly on the head.

"N-no, I didn't mean to..." Yae shook her head, flustered by the misunderstanding. Her honor was being called into question.

"Oh, sure. Forcing me to submit to you, getting handsy with me in your house, and drinking in my brother's naked body were all *pure accidents*. I'll say it again—you're an arrogant perv," Arai said derisively.

"Why would you say that?!" Yae was trembling.

To her side, Sui was holding a hand to one cheek in embarrassment.

“Anyway, let’s build a fire over there and dry your clothes... Our resident molester exorcized and cleansed the area, so we should be safe from shades and wild animals for the time being,” Arai suggested, looking down at Yae with contempt. Yae was hurt; she hardly thought she deserved to be called a molester.



After Yae gratefully took the robe from Sui and they set up a fire within sight of the spring, Arai left the group, saying only “I’ll be back soon” and disappearing into the trees. Thinking she may as well dry her shoes, too, Yae undid the laces and set them by the fire. Her clothes and her shoes would probably be dry after an hour.

Yae and Sui decided to move to an old tree a short distance away and rest there. It was chilly compared to the base of the mountain even in summer, but it wasn’t cold enough to be comfortable staying by the fire for long. Yae sat down on a root protruding from the ground, hugged her knees, and sighed. Sui sat down next to her and looked up at the branches and leaves expanding like an umbrella above their heads. His eyes narrowed in the dappled sunlight.

Feeling curious, Yae looked up as well. The occasional breeze rustled the leaves, making them sound like ocean waves. She listened to the pleasant sound for some time, then turned back to Sui. *What should I do now?* Yae thought absentmindedly as she watched him, his figure brightened by the sparse beams of light reaching through the trees. Judging by the position of the sun, it had been a few hours since her encounter with the shade. That probably meant both Miya Province and Kaki Province had received news of the attack on the procession. Yae would then have been reported missing.

She stifled a sigh. Thinking about the future was a little more than she could handle at the moment. Now that she had time to breathe, all the fatigue she had been unconscious of came crashing down on her. Her eyelids felt heavy.

It was extremely ironic. So that she wouldn’t be a burden on others, so that she wouldn’t be shunned from the group, Yae had always worked hard and lived honestly. But she had still lost everything. Had all her effort and patience been for nothing? She wanted people to turn and look at her because of how hard she tried and all the things she put up with. She wanted to be wanted, not just tolerated. Maybe her desperation was too obvious.

I thought I was already aware that I would never get anything in return. She felt ashamed of her existence. That was the hardest realization of all. *No, I can't do this. Thinking too much when I'm feeling down won't get me anywhere.* When Yae put her hands to her temples, Sui looked over at her with an unexpectedly serious expression.

"Hey, Yae, if I'm not mistaken, what you were wearing is a kind of bridal clothing...", he began. Yae buried her head in her knees. That was a topic she would rather not dig up again. "Were you going to be married to Arai? You know, as a sacrifice?"

"A sacrifice?"

Yae had wondered what he was going to say after turning so serious... At first, she was startled by his bizarre question, but then she remembered Arai's explanation of how they met. She could see how he would conclude that she was given to Arai as an offering during the ceremony.

"No... But he feels indebted toward me for some reason. At least, I think. He did try to kill me, but then he knelt and swore his fealty. I don't actually want him to serve me, though. I wish he would just live however he likes," Yae mumbled, pleading with him to put a stop to his brother's rash behavior. Sui appeared to think, and then he smiled. She was taken aback by how genuine it looked.

"My older brother is the only one who knows what he is thinking. But I feel a debt of gratitude to you as well. If my brother has put himself in your service, I would not hesitate to bend the knee as well...were circumstances different. I don't know when I am going to lose my sanity again, so I would be useless to you." Those despairing words were shocking coming from someone who looked so peaceful. "Why were you wearing a bridal garment, then? Were you about to be married to someone?"

Yae frowned. Too many inconceivable things had happened in sequence, and she hadn't yet been able to process it all. "Yes, but...it wasn't just me; it was multiple women."

"A group wedding? Was the province you live in conquered by another?" Sui asked with concern, and Yae quickly shook her head.

"No, it wasn't. The other province was having an issue arising from too many homogeneous marriages. Apparently, deformation cases had been increasing. My province had also become imbalanced toward one Nature and wanted an influx of outside blood. Talks began, and it was decided that the provinces would exchange ten villagers each. We sent women, and they sent men," she explained.

"Hmm? I understand how too many homogeneous marriages would result in an imbalance in Natures, but how would that have anything to do with an increase in deformation? It sounds like your province was deceived," Sui muttered doubtfully, putting a finger to

his chin.

“The other province really didn’t pressure us into it... I guess group marriages do happen a lot after invasions in countries with wide open plains, huh? Izumo is a mountainous land, so the provinces are relatively isolated from one another... We don’t get much interaction beyond merchants traveling to sell their wares.”

The winding and precipitous landscape served as a natural shield that reduced conflict among provinces. There were some disadvantages to that, however. The difficulty of travel led to many provinces being cut off from exchange and isolated, which led to concerns such as population decline.

“The women and I were being led to the other domain by the men, but we were attacked by shades, and—I got separated from everyone.” Her ego wouldn’t let her admit the truth that she was left to die. But it seemed that Sui was able to infer the truth from Yae’s mood and expression.

“That’s horrible. But you shouldn’t feel bad about what happened. In fact, you should be glad you didn’t have to marry a man so feeble he couldn’t protect his bride. A husband should guard his wife with his life.”

Was he really Arai’s brother? Sui’s kind attempt to console her touched her heart.

“No, I... I’m Natureless, like Arai said. My province has an imbalance of Gentle Natures, and the other consists primarily of Wild Natures. All the other brides were Gentle Natures. I understand that it was the instinct of the Wild-Natured men to prioritize the safety of the other women,” Yae said, growing steadily more embarrassed and saying things she didn’t need to. She had wanted her feelings affirmed before, but when she received the words she was hoping for, she got scared.

“So sacrificing you was the only option? I don’t think it needed to be that way... But well, maybe they really did have no choice,” Sui responded seriously to Yae’s insincere attempt to avoid expressing her true feelings. It was precisely because he was being serious that it hurt when he didn’t condemn the men’s actions. Even though she was the one who had just defended them.

I wanted him to voluntarily criticize the men for abandoning me, so I purposely took the opposite position. Yae had tried to show herself to be tolerant and open-minded, hoping that Sui would disagree with her. But she didn’t get the response she wanted, leaving her feeling disappointed. She hated how much of a coward she could be.

“But if you set your own personal worth so low, it will eventually influence the way others see you as well. Are you okay with that, Yae?” Sui asked, sounding at once strict and comforting.

“...N-no, I'm not...!” Yae stammered.

“Then you should have been treated with the same priority as the other women. Am I wrong?” he said softly, and Yae pursed her lips.

It was true that Yae had been cast aside by the Miya Province men. That had already happened, and nothing could change it now. But even understanding what the men were thinking, Sui acknowledged and accepted the misery Yae felt upon being abandoned. Wasn't this the affirmation Yae wanted all along?

“...You're not useless, Sui... Even if you're going to lose your sanity soon,” Yae muttered and averted her eyes in place of thanking him.

“Is that so? You're a simple, lovely girl, Yae,” he responded.

“Huh?! Lovely...?!” she exclaimed, and Sui opened his eyes wide as if wondering what he'd said that was so strange. *Oh, I see, he said that from the standpoint of a god!* Yae finally grasped his intention and felt embarrassed by her panicked reaction. He had meant that like “What lovely creatures humans are, living to the full their short, mortal lives.”

I got my hopes up for a second there, didn't I...? She felt a little bitter but also like some warmth had returned to her frozen heart.

“Hey, what would you do, older brother?” Sui asked cheerfully, looking to the side. Yae quickly raised her head and saw Arai looking down at them with a foot on one of the old roots and wild, gray-furred rabbits dangling from both arms. When did he get back?

“What are you talking about?” Arai scowled, and Sui smiled at him. The sunlight illuminated Arai through the trees as well.

“What would you say to a husband who abandoned his wife to save himself?”

“Go to hell, you pathetic thing,” he spat hatefully with an expression that said his was the obvious answer, then he headed for the fire. Once there, he immediately got to work on the rabbits.

Sui laughed. “My brother is quite intense.”

“...What would you say, Sui?” Yae asked quietly, and he took a moment to think.

“I despise conflict, but...I suppose I would order the man to disembowel himself,” he answered.

It was then that Yae was finally convinced they were brothers. Their answers were equally extreme. She felt they were a bit too much for her, but at the same time, she noticed the anguish in her heart had already disappeared.



"I am surprised to hear that shades went out of their way to attack a wedding procession," Sui said seriously as he ate cooked rabbit meat on a stick. "As spring is a time for new life, there is usually an increase in shades as well. But this is the seventh moon, right? It's rare for them to appear near villages in numbers at this time of year."

Yae looked at the brothers in turn and opened her mouth to speak as she cooked her rabbit meat by the fire. "This might be a rude question, but...you two both caught deformation to varying degrees, right?"

"Yeah, shortly after we drifted to this world and became free. Once I was sealed, though, the deformation was nothing compared to the impurity caused by my festering resentment," Arai answered casually. Sui looked at him in admiration.

"My brother alleviated the symptoms of his deformation by giving himself the new name Arai. He did the same for me by giving me my name," he explained.

"H-huh..." Yae thought on that for a bit. *I wonder if naming a part of him Kuroashi made any difference.* It was possible it had had some undesirable effect. Realizing this, she looked up at Arai hesitantly.

"But then Arai was sealed, and I met the same fate. My deformation resumed in no time, perhaps because my despair was stronger than his. I do not believe it is possible for me to be purified at this point," Sui said.

Yae wondered if the name Arai had given him had lost its effect. Sui's expression was peaceful even as he looked ahead to his own death. But Yae realized the truth was he had just given up.

"I want you to kill me sooner rather than later, Brother. I do not want to turn into a shade. The thought of becoming a fallen god troubles me even more than being warped. My divine power is strong, so if I lose myself and transform, I will surely spread calamity." Yae shivered at the word *calamity*. "A shade will eventually return to nature, but the strength of my divine power will most likely prolong the period before my death. If that happens, I will come to be treated as a fallen god."

If people continually called Sui a fallen god, eventually the words would gain power and he truly would become one. Essentially, fallen gods were shades that people associated with misfortune, fear, and resentment. That was why ceremonies were held to seal them away. However, society's definitions of spirits, monsters, and curses in this world were extremely vague. All beings that brought about great disaster were considered fallen gods, even if they did not originate as shades.

Maybe it's less that the definition is vague and more that this world just isn't fully settled yet. That would explain why the action of naming

held such great meaning. People may have only just begun to realize the importance of naming things.

“...Perhaps this is my last supper?” Sui joked, but no one laughed.

“I didn’t bring her here to kill you,” Arai said, ignoring the solemn mood and pointing his rabbit-meat skewer at Yae. “I brought her because she’s Natureless, making her immune to deformation. Her soul is unbelievably smooth. She’s an uroko, too.”

They both stared at Yae without reserve, making her jump.

“When uroko are born, their souls are as perfectly smooth as Yae’s is now. Their souls transform to varying degrees and gain a Nature as they adapt to this world, but that didn’t happen with her. That’s why she’s still Natureless.”

Yae thought about Arai’s words. She felt like all of that had something to do with the memories she had retained from her previous life. Her soul likely didn’t have room for a new self to form.

“Yae thinks things in her subconscious like ‘Deformation is impossible; like I’d ever catch that!’ and ‘What’s a Nature? That sounds stupid!’”

“Hey, did you just mimic me? Do I really sound that sassy?” Yae said, offended. Arai paid her no mind and tossed his stick aside with a serious expression.

“That’s why the illnesses of this world don’t affect her... Or rather, the illnesses that she feels are ‘impossible.’ I was wondering if that feeling imprinted into her soul might be able to heal Sui’s deformation.”

“...Huh?! Me?! All I can do is perform a little Appellation. I’m no doctor,” Yae protested.

“No doctor is born a doctor.”

What kind of nonsense logic was that?

“Does that mean my subconscious denial of deformation gives me immunity? Are you saying there’s a chance my immunity could have an effect on other people, too?” Confused, Yae fired off several questions at once. Arai smiled.

“You catch on quick.”

Those words weren’t praise to Yae. In her mind, they meant “convenient to have around,” which was negative.

“But by that logic, won’t my immunity disappear the moment I accept deformation as real?”

“It won’t. You probably already acknowledged deformation in your mind as a real illness long ago,” Arai asserted. “I’m talking about the makeup of your soul. You can call it instinct if you want. It won’t allow the transformation that occurs in this world to affect you. Acquired knowledge has nothing over innate feelings.”

Yae held her breath. She didn’t have a comeback. *So I was right:*

My memories are related to all this. She had experienced fevers and headaches in her previous life, but deformation did not exist. If her soul was still colored by her experiences there, she wasn't going to be tainted by deformation. There was no way something that didn't exist could influence her.

"Yae, try touching Sui," Arai said.

"Touch him? ...Huh?" Yae responded.

Arai looked from a wary Yae to Sui and motioned with his chin for his brother to strip. Sui was a bit hesitant, but after Arai pressed him again, he resigned himself and took off his undergarment. Despite Yae's discomfort, curiosity got the better of her, and she darted her eyes toward his chest. Her embarrassment was gone in a flash, and she began to stare. She had gotten a glance at it when she borrowed his robe, but now she was sure. There was definitely something strange on his chest.

"The deformation has reached his organs...", Yae said to herself. Sui laughed bitterly.

"I'm telling you, I don't have long left. There is no healing it once the symptoms get this bad," he said before ripping open the blackened skin over his chest as if taking off a lid.

Startled, Yae pulled back. "What the...?" But once she got a glimpse of the inside of his chest, she couldn't avert her eyes.

Deformation could be divided into different types, just like how there were different varieties of colds and headaches. Some cases caused the victim to lose themselves and become a shade, and some contracted deformation as a result of senility. The latter variety was called regression, and most victims didn't grow violent even if their appearance changed or they grew in size.

No matter how the path to death differed, everyone ended up the same in the end. Death was peculiar in this world—the expired life returned to nature. The body transformed and swelled, and the flesh dissolved. The bones petrified, and corpse bugs—parasitic insects that only appeared inside bodies infected by deformation—appeared around them. On rare occasions, the bugs gathered first, causing the victim to lose their flesh.

Symptoms had already begun appearing on Sui's body, showing the gravity of his illness. The flesh of his abdomen was completely gone, and his bones were visible—they almost looked as if they were rusting. His organs had shrunk as if petrified. Small corpse bugs were packed closely onto his bones.

They were called bugs, but they didn't look like ordinary insects. They looked more like cocoons. They were glossy, making them look closer to silver than white. They were about the size of the fingernail on a pinky finger, and some were transparent like drops of water.

They grew more opaque and silver in color as they hardened.

So this is what it looks like... This was the first time Yae had ever seen the inside of a body inflicted with deformation up close. She had actually prepared herself for a more grotesque sight, and she was surprised by how calm she was as she looked at it. It was a little creepy, but really, it was almost like a kind of serene miniature garden. Even the organs looked like a pile of reddish-brown stones, so it didn't really feel like she was looking at a human body.

"D-does it hurt...?" Yae asked, her voice thin.

"Not anymore," Sui answered with resignation. He ran his fingers along his breastbone, which looked like it was turning into a tree branch.

"Can I touch it?"

"I don't mind, but I don't recommend it... Even being Natureless might not protect you if you touch it directly."

Yae smiled softly at Sui's concern. *Arai's prediction from earlier might just be right.* Logically, she recognized that deformation was a real illness. But her overriding feeling was more like *There's no way. I've never heard of something like that. It sounds like magic.*

She poked at a cocoon, and Sui gasped. She continued fiddling with the cocoon until the string wrapped around the bone broke. It fell into the palm of her hand, and she rubbed it with her fingers. She expected it to be hard, but it was tender like gummy candy, and she flinched away in surprise.

The cocoon had been soft when Yae touched it, but it made a hard noise when it fell to the ground and hit a pebble. She cautiously picked it back up and was surprised again. The cocoon was dented where she'd pinched it, giving it a bean-like shape, but it had completely hardened. Perhaps because it had been separated from the bone.

It looks and feels like an actual lump of silver. It was so beautiful that it looked like it could be used for jewelry. As Yae stood there in quiet confusion, Arai took the cocoon from her hand.

"You'll be infected, Brother!" Sui panicked, but Arai responded without looking at him.

"No, I don't think so... It's solidified completely into metal."

After that, a short silence fell. Yae had heard that the parasitic corpse bugs disappeared somewhere after hatching, and it was said they had the power to enrich the life force of trees and plants. It was true that the earth always seemed revitalized in areas where shades had returned to nature. This phenomenon was, without exaggeration, a blessing that supported people's livelihoods. But Yae had never heard of a corpse bug turning into metal.

"All right, Dr. Yae. Heal my brother," Arai said, looking up and

giving Yae a radiant smile. Yae was shocked; she never expected *him* to call her “doctor.”

She opened her mouth to say that there was no way she could do this but stopped when she noticed Sui looking at her. There had been a faint spark of hope in his half-resigned eyes, but when he saw Yae’s expression, he closed them in distress. “...You don’t have to force yourself, Yae. I don’t mind dying.”

But what Yae clearly heard within his words was “I don’t want to die.” *I don’t want to die. I want to live.* Yae knew what it was like to have that strong feeling well up from the depths of your body.

“I-I’ll do it. I’ll heal you. I’ll be a doctor who specializes in deformation!” Yae exclaimed desperately. She saw Arai smiling faintly in the corner of her vision.

IV Gossip on the Wind of a Nighttime Storm

Once Yae had put her dry clothes back on and returned Sui's robe, Sui insisted they find a place they could relax before she started treatment. Arai suggested they move a little farther to the west side of the mountain, and Yae spoke up in protest.

"If we go any farther west, we'll be able to see Mount Saeba. That's forbidden ground," she said. The entirety of Mount Saeba except for the north side was designated as forbidden, so it was an unwritten rule in this country that you shouldn't go anywhere near it.

"That's exactly why it's the perfect spot. People rarely go there," Arai responded, ignoring her concern.

"We'll make the gods angry if we enter forbidden ground without permission. They'll punish us," Yae argued, clearly afraid. Arai sneered.

"I'm something of a god myself. Who's going to punish me?" There was no reasoning with him.

Yae may have instinctively treated deformation as impossible, but she was just as scared as anyone else of the gods of rivers and mountains and other mysterious beings feared since ancient times. She had been the same in her last life.

"We don't know what's going to happen, so wouldn't it be better to not go charging into a dangerous place like that?" Yae said, looking to Sui for support. Unfortunately, he agreed with his brother.

"My brother and I will notice anything dangerous right away. We also have a good understanding of the mountain's taboos, so there's no need to worry."

When Yae still showed reluctance despite Sui's attempt to soothe her, Arai lost his patience and shifted into his golden tiger form. The Siddham script pattern on his forehead seemed to wriggle as if in irritation. "Hurry up and get on," he said.

Sui lifted Yae up and put her on the golden tiger's back. "Here's my brother's sword. Hold on to mine as well," he said, forcing both of

the swords onto her before transforming into his beast form, too. With Arai's golden fur and Sui's white fur, they truly did look like divine brothers.

The white tiger pressed his nose into Yae's knees and began to walk at a sluggish pace. The golden tiger did so, too, with Yae on his back. She gave up her resistance and made a silent prayer. *Please don't let me get cursed.* A great variety of things inhabited the mountains. Inhuman beings dwelled there just as humans did.

At first, Yae was gripped with fear as she rode the golden tiger, but when she felt the sunlight poking through the trees overhead, she began to think that maybe she could trust the two brothers. It seemed like Sui was telling the truth when he claimed they knew the taboos of the mountain. They made a number of decisions which seemed strange at first, such as making long detours, purposely passing through the same spot several times, and pestering Yae not to look one way or another.

The number of mysteries increased dramatically when Mount Saeba came into view. Yae had never been to the west side of Mount Yagi. Villagers of Kaki Province rarely left the area where they were born and raised. Kaki Province had ownership over the south side of Mount Yagi, so people occasionally went there to hunt or sell crops, but they didn't venture into the mountains beyond that. Mount Saeba, the majority of which was designated as forbidden land, belonged to the gods; people feared their wrath and didn't go near it.

The tiger brothers were heading toward a valley on the west side with a wide river running through it. There were many cliffs, and steep rock faces dominated the view. Gold was once mined here, meaning the remains of mining tunnels were scattered about as well. But the resources had quickly been exhausted, and the mine had been closed and abandoned.

The presence of mining tunnels means there should have been a place of execution, too. Frequent cave-ins and fires made mining tunnels dangerous, so criminals provided the main labor force. It was always hard to remove the stench of death from such places. As a result, areas near mines were often treated as forbidden land. Being able to see Mount Saeba wasn't the only reason people avoided this part of the mountain—it also hid a less-than-savory past.

Among the villagers, there were those who seriously believed that the darkness of night came from the mines. Furthermore, plants and animals grew to larger sizes in places that humans avoided or forgot, and the chance of deformation was greater. These considerations further encouraged people to keep their distance.

After running down an almost-vertical cliff, Arai and Sui came to an abrupt stop. Their fur rippled to show they were on edge. Seeing

that made Yae nervous as well, and she looked ahead cautiously to see a long black shape through the gaps in the trees. Her first thought was that it was a caterpillar the size of a giant monster, but then she realized it was a mysterium—a locomotive engine.

“It’s okay. It’s not alive,” Yae said assuredly, and she patted the golden tiger on the head.

“I wasn’t scared,” he said indignantly, turning slightly to look at her.

“It surprised me,” the white tiger said, eyes sparkling, looking up at Yae on his brother’s back. She wanted to pet him, but she was afraid she would fall off Arai’s back if she reached out that far.

“The mysteriums in this area don’t have as many cracks or pieces missing,” Yae muttered as she fretfully waved her hands to shoo away a fly the size of a wasp. She felt like the insects had gotten slightly bigger along with the mysteriums.

“What’s that mysterium over there...? No way... It’s an instant noodle cup,” Yae said.

“Instant...noodle?” the white tiger repeated next to his brother, twitching his nose. Yae responded with a smile.

“It’s a container for a type of food... Wow, look at that one. That’s ginormous. I thought it was some kind of pillar, but it’s the remains of a toothbrush stuck into the ground.”

“Tooth brush...?”

“It’s for cleaning your teeth. That one over there looks like a coffee cup. Oh wow, is that a Matryoshka doll?”

“Co-fee cup. Matree...oshka doll.” The white tiger repeated Yae’s words with difficulty, twitching his whiskers up and down. It was an amusing sight, but he was perfectly serious. “Hmm... Be careful, Brother. There could be shades lurking around here. They like mysteriums.”

“And this is a mysterium graveyard,” the golden tiger muttered sarcastically as Yae caught sight of something red.

“Whoaaa!” she exclaimed after doing a double take.

“Wh-what is it, Yae?”

“Is it a shade?”

Her dramatic response startled the brothers, and they came to a halt with their ears straight up.

“Sorry, it’s not. I just saw something nostalgic and got excited,” she apologized. The mysterium she had found was a red can of soda that was so popular in her previous world that everyone on the planet would probably recognize it.

It was about the size of a two-story building. The part sunk into the ground had already begun petrifying, and there was a hole in the bottom large enough for an adult to walk through without crouching.

It could probably be made into a house with some sprucing up. The side with the pull tab is facing down, so there would be no need to worry about the ceiling as long as there are no holes in the "bottom."

The golden tiger glanced back at her as if he could hear her thoughts. "You like it, don't you?"

"Y-yeah, I guess...", she responded.

Arai trotted toward the can. There was a giant lidded glass bottle next to it that was the size of a storehouse.

The river is nearby, so maybe these mysteriums drifted down it and accumulated here.

Aside from the can, there was also a bowl, a porcelain savings box shaped like an animal, a mailbox knocked over on its side, and plenty of other mysteriums that could be used as houses among the trees. It felt like a small village could be built here.

"I'm going to look inside," the white tiger said confidently, and he crept in through the hole in the can.

Yae got down from the golden tiger's back and took a look around. She couldn't sense any people there other than them, and she heard the pleasant chirping of wild birds. Sui emerged from the can almost immediately.

"There is an unspeakable amount of spiderwebs in there. I'm a horrible mess...", he said miserably. His entire body was covered in webs. Yae smiled and began to brush them out of his fur. "There are traces that someone used to live inside it. They left some old things behind."

"I wonder if there was a village here not long ago," Yae conjectured.

The white tiger bobbed his left and right whiskers in an alternating pattern. "I don't think so. You can see the entrance to a mining tunnel on the opposite cliff. The laborers might have used these as their temporary dwellings. The furniture inside is old and covered in dust. It looks like it hasn't been touched by human hands for a number of years at least."

"Could bandits have used it?" Arai asked after changing back into a person. Sui saw and followed his example.

Yae noted to herself that their human forms were gorgeous as well. *They look so godlike. Or maybe I only think that because I know that's what they used to be...* Their beauty practically blinded her.

"I think the chance of that is low... But regardless, people haven't been this way for some time," Sui answered, still brushing spiderwebs out of his hair.

Yae began to think. If that was the case, she could use this as a temporary residence. As long as there were no shade, bandit, or beast attacks. *But it's not like I have anywhere else to go. If only I wasn't*

Natureless, she thought fleetingly. If she had a Nature, she never would have been abandoned by the Miya Prefecture men. Most likely, at least.



“...Let’s get started on Sui’s treatment while it’s still safe,” Yae said, pushing away those dark thoughts and smiling at the silver-haired man.



“Go ahead. Do as you will,” Sui encouraged softly, sitting on a slumping, misshapen boulder.

Yae understood that deformation was different from normal illnesses, but she was overcome with an indescribable emotion as Sui smiled and peeled open the skin over his chest. She gathered herself and leaned her face forward to study the affected area.

“Your skin has hardened.” She felt around his open chest with her fingers and found it had the consistency of a rough tree trunk. *I said I would treat him, but how do I actually do that?* She had confidently declared she would heal him after Arai talked her up, but she didn’t know anything about medicine. That said, no amount of specialty medical knowledge she might have gained if she had been a doctor in her previous world would have been useful for treating deformation.

“Most of his organs have been eaten by bugs,” Arai said, walking up to join her and frowning.

Yae calmly observed the inside of Sui’s body. Due to his organs becoming more like stones and his bones becoming more like branches, his insides more closely resembled the framework of a pocket watch than the inside of a living being.

“He might get better if you remove all the bugs,” Arai suggested, perhaps noticing Yae’s hesitation.

That’s a pretty reckless suggestion, but there might actually be some logic to it. Even in my last world, surgical procedures were carried out to remove malignant tumors. She couldn’t think of anything else, so she may as well give it a try.

“...Is it still okay for me to touch with my bare hands?” Yae asked, and Sui responded with a yawn.

“You don’t seem to be at risk of being infected, so I suspect you’ll be fine.”

“I’m asking for you. I don’t want it to hurt...”

“It won’t. Feel around all you want.”

How can he be so carefree about this? Yae thought as she took a cloth from her sash that she used as a handkerchief. *Oh yeah, and where did the rabbit meat he ate earlier go? Could it have simply disappeared as soon as he swallowed it?*

She used the cloth to wipe away the cocoon-like corpse bugs

clinging to his bones, but some were sturdy and wouldn't come off. Just like the first one, the cocoons that fell from his bones turned into clumps of silver. She wanted to take some tweezers and pluck them all off...

Arai quickly grew tired of watching as Yae struggled with the corpse bugs. "I'm gonna go scout the area," he said, transforming into a tiger and running off into the trees without waiting for a reply.

Yae returned her attention to the inside of Sui's body. Mixed in among the cocoons she had been unable to remove was a single clear one. There was a white insect that looked like a silkworm inside it. Finding it strange, she pinched it casually, causing it to break.

"Huh?!" she leaped back. The silkworm-like insect jumped out of the broken cocoon and fell to the ground, immediately growing to the size of a human child. It had a white torso, and over its face, it wore a mask like a dog's skull.

"S-Sui!" Yae called out, voice trembling, her eyes fixed on the monstrous corpse bug. This was probably the leader of the group, the equivalent of a queen bee. Sui wasn't responding, and his body was all balled up as if to protect his chest. Had he died? She turned toward him in a panic, but just then, the corpse bug began to wriggle its silkworm-like body. It was going to run.

"Stop!" Yae screamed without thinking. She felt a little silly; what reason would it have to listen to her? As soon as she thought that, however, the corpse bug jerked its body around and faced her with its dog-skull mask.

"No-name flesh," it said.

It can talk?! Yae was too shocked that it had spoken to process what it said.

"No-name eyes."

"Wh-what?"

"No-name mouth."

"No-name mouth...?"

"No-name hair no-name nose no-name hands no-name feet."

The corpse bug continued in a hoarse, monotone voice. It was a strange voice that sounded neither male nor female.

"No-name guts no-name being meaningless being ground to powder and scatter."

"...This person is named Sui!" Yae yelled to drown out the corpse bug's words. She had the feeling it was trying to place a curse on Sui that would erase his existence. "He was once a sublime god. He hails from a revered realm and graced this one with a fiery spark. I will call his name again. This man has a form. He does not stiffen; he does not bend. His form possesses a name."

The speech Yae had launched into was the prayer that Chief

Kadaru had performed when she was saved after her awakening. She got the feeling the real prayer was longer and more abstruse—she was only rearranging the parts of it that she remembered.

“He is named Sui. He has a form in this land.”

After responding to the corpse bug’s curse with her own, a strange phenomenon began to occur around them. The undergrowth around the bug began to frost. The air chilled like the middle of winter and turned her breath white. It was snowing before she knew it, the snowflakes big and powdery enough to obstruct her vision.

She wiped the snow from her eyelashes and blinked, then gasped with shock. There was a line of shadow people carrying black lacquer trays and walking past either side of her. The shadowy figures had blurred outlines as if seen through frosted glass, but the black lacquer trays were perfectly clear. On one of the trays, Yae saw a large gray stone. It had the kanji for “Blood” written on it in scarlet ink. Each of the trays carried a similar stone with Japanese characters written on them. *First Flesh, Second Flesh, First Organ, Second Organ, First Bone...* Yae was dumbfounded.

The procession surrounded her and circled counterclockwise. Actually, they weren’t concerned with her—they were delivering their trays to the silkworm-like corpse bug in front of her. The giant bug ate each of the stones it was given. Yae froze for a moment, then her face went pale.

“That flesh and blood isn’t for you. It belongs to Sui. Return it,” she said. The procession halted. “There’s nothing to freeze here. Return it now.” As she repeated her demand, even the snow paused in midair.

“Return it,” she repeated one more time, and it was as if time were being rewound. The snow went back up into the sky, and the procession began to circle in the opposite direction. When that happened, the corpse bug broke into a tantrum, flailing around. It roared, flung its fat body into the shadow figures, and trampled the black lacquer trays that fell to the ground.

Then it came rushing straight toward Yae. “No way, wait a second! Stay away from me! I can’t fight... Arai! Arai, help!” she screamed, calling Arai’s name without thinking.

The golden tiger ran past her an instant later like a gust of wind, holding the black sword in his mouth. He parried the corpse bug easily with a front paw, then assumed his human form and unsheathed the sword in a single motion. The brilliance of the naked blade was as blinding to Yae’s eyes as the sun, and Arai beheaded the corpse bug with one strike. It was a perfectly fluid movement.

A violent wind assaulted them the moment he cut through the bug’s body. Yae closed her eyes and used her arms to cover her face.

She quickly dropped them again to survey the situation. The snow had stopped, and it felt like summer again. Arai was ahead of her, holding the black sword with his back turned toward her. The headless body of the corpse bug was there, too.

“Arai, the corpse bug...!” She was about to rush to his side when she saw the corpse bug’s body crumbling like a miniature avalanche. Actually, it would be more accurate to say it transformed into silver pellets which then collapsed to the ground in a pile. The “pellets” were the size of walnuts, and shaped like them, too.

Arai shook off the black filth that clung to his blade and turned toward Yae, who was still staring at the bug’s remains. “That was well said.” She had no idea what he meant at first, but then she realized he was praising her for responding to the corpse bug’s curse with a curse of her own.

Arai sheathed the sword and put a hand to his waist. “I had a bad feeling. Looks like I was right to turn back,” he muttered. “Is this real silver? I wouldn’t have thought even the corpse bug’s core could change into metal.”

He stared at the large pile of silver on the ground doubtfully.

“Corpse bugs are a sort of death god. Normally, people make them rot with medicine or weaken them with incantations...but removing corpse bugs once they have latched on to a host is very difficult. Even if you do get lucky and succeed, the concern then becomes where to send them next.”

Yae looked down at her hands as she listened to Arai’s explanation. She wasn’t a doctor, so she didn’t know anything about the proper way to treat deformation, but she had heard it was difficult to cure. It was also very contagious. But unlike elebeasts, humans were resistant to deformation, and Yae was Natureless on top of that. Even now, she did not appear to have been infected with the curse.

“You can’t respond to the corpse bug’s voice. You are guaranteed to get infected if you do. But if you don’t respond, it’ll escape and end up taking hold of someone else. That’s why everyone hesitates to perform treatment. Especially Wild and Blessed Natures, who are the most susceptible to catching it.”

“...Oh,” Yae said, and fell silent. Arai looked toward her and smiled meaningfully, as if to lift the mood. She tensed.

“You didn’t disappoint. You were able to drive the corpse bug out of Sui’s body and resist the curse.”

“That was the first time I’ve ever touched a corpse bug, though. I guess being Natureless kept me safe?” Yae said.

“It’s not just that. You’re shockingly odorless,” Arai claimed, approaching her brazenly and touching her hair. She lost her nerve and tried to back away, but he pulled her face toward his to look into

her eyes and brushed her hair behind her ears. Yae froze like a deer in headlights. "From the corpse bug's perspective, you are alive even though your lack of odor says you shouldn't be. It's not surprising it found you strange. It thought you were a living corpse."

"That makes me sound like a zombie," Yae remarked.

"What's a zom-bee?" Arai asked in confusion. Yae gave him a forced smile and stealthily backed away.

"Um, a *zombie* is what you would call a dead person who has come back to life."

"Huh? ...Anyway, besides, you've been performing the role of ceremony envoy for many years. The energy inside your body has been cleansed."

"Whoa, I wonder if I've gained divine power."

"You haven't. What are you so happy about...? Anyway, a 'zombie' should be covered in filth, but you're as pure as a god. It was probably scared witless when it saw that. You're like a corpse bug's natural enemy."

Yae wasn't sure how to react to that. Being told she had a pure soul was nothing to get excited about if she didn't have divine power. "So was it okay for you to slice open the corpse bug like that?" Yae asked, realizing with a panic that Arai might have been infected.

Arai shook his head calmly. "The corpse bug's core flew out of Sui's body, and your curse weakened it even more. That enabled me to slice it apart. Yae, you were smart to call me. Even if you were able to repel the corpse bug, you wouldn't have been able to kill it. That's my role."

Yae groaned. *Why was calling out for him the first thing I thought to do?* She had probably subconsciously assumed that Arai would be able to do something about it.

"...By the way, how's Sui?" Arai asked, looking toward his brother, who was still lying limply on the boulder. Yae hurried over to him, and Arai followed.

"Sui," Yae called out. She touched his shoulders and cheeks, but he wouldn't wake up. Her heart sank for a moment, and she thought he might really have died, but then she noticed with relief that he was breathing. "He just fainted."

Arai's expression relaxed as well, and he gently brushed Sui's forehead.

"...Arai! His chest is healed!" Yae exclaimed with surprise in her voice. Sui's chest looked perfectly normal; there was no bruising, and his skin was smooth.

"Does that mean he's cured? His organs, too?" said Arai. Yae patted Sui's chest to make sure, and Arai whacked her lightly on the back of the head. "Don't molest my brother in his sleep."

“No, that’s not what I was doing!”

“Leave him alone until he wakes up... I don’t wanna see you gettin’ handsy.”

Yae was astounded by the lack of trust, but Arai ignored her, lifted Sui’s body, and carried him to a shady spot beneath some trees. He also refastened his open robe. He and Yae watched Sui in silence for some time but saw no change.

“...I think I’m going to clean the inside of that mysterium. Can you help me, Arai?” It seemed like it was going to be a while until Sui woke up, so she wanted to clean up the interior of the giant can and lay him down to rest inside. She decided to leave the silver walnuts on the ground for now on the off chance they could be dangerous. Arai was grumbling in irritation, but Yae pushed him from behind and set off toward the can.

Around the back side was a vertical, oval-shaped hole that Yae could just barely see through if she stood on her tiptoes. It was about shoulder width and forty centimeters tall. It was probably formed by a rusted part of the wall crumbling and falling off. It looked like it could be used as a light source.

Yae brushed away the vines and spiderwebs that were covering it and peered inside. “What the—? There’s a skeleton!” She jumped back from the hole. There was a skeleton leaning against the wall next to the window.

Arai poked his head in. “It’s just human bones. What’s the big deal?” he said with exasperation before he walked around the structure and inside through the large hole in the front. After a few minutes of rustling sounds, he reemerged, dragging the skeleton behind him.

“Don’t you get it? That’s a skeleton! If this person had died of old age and regressed, their bones would have turned to branches, but they haven’t!” Yae insisted. That was proof this person died an unexpected, unusual death.

“So what? Maybe they drank a special poison, or a curse prevented the regression process from beginning... We’re right next to Mount Saeba and all those forbidden grounds. There are any number of reasons why they might have died an unusual death,” he responded, glancing at Yae indifferently as she backed away. He went to the river to dispose of the skeleton and then started to do the same with bunches of household items that had become unusable from corrosion.

Is it okay to do that without a purifying fire?! Won’t he be cursed just throwing stuff away like that?! Yae clung to the unconscious Sui and trembled as Arai briskly carried all the junk out of the can. Large insects skittered from the door every time Arai carried something out,

which spooked her as well. *I almost never saw locusts and spiders that big in Kaki Province. They're the size of cats!*

"Hey, I threw out everything we don't need. I left a little inside, so decide what you want to keep later," Arai said. He clapped his hands in annoyance to shoo away a ladybug at his feet that was about fifteen centimeters wide. Yae came to a sudden realization.

"...I think I may want to worship you, Arai," she said. He spoke roughly, but he was kind and a hard worker. He was good with bugs, too, which was a plus.

"Hmm? Do whatever you want. After all, I'm sure people worshipped me in the past," he responded. He had a tendency to speak brazenly like that, but she found it kind of funny. "I'm going to go check out the area for real this time, all right? Don't do anything unnecessary, and don't enter any other mysteries. There could be wild animals hiding inside."

Yae nodded obediently.

"If a shade appears, yell. Call for me. Got it?"

"...Okay. Got it."

Arai stared at her for a bit, then once again left to go scout the area.

He'd told her not to do anything unnecessary, but he probably wouldn't mind if she went inside the mostly clean can. If possible, she wanted to lay Sui down inside it. She walked around gathering thin sticks and vines, being careful to keep Sui in her view. Then she tied them up in a bundle to make a makeshift broom.

Praying that she wouldn't step on any insects or get cursed, Yae gripped the broom and entered the can. She had removed the vines on the window, so the inside was bright with sunlight. The only things Arai had left behind were an unsteady wooden shelf and an empty wooden box. That was a letdown. It seemed like there hadn't been much inside in the first place.

The size of the can's interior was about the same as her Whiskey House in Kaki Province, but its circular shape made it feel more spacious. She had been worried it would be uninhabitable if the rust on the walls was really bad, but that didn't look like a concern. Only a small part of the wall was rusted, and much of it was petrified. The floor was dirt, and there were weeds growing out of it. The ceiling was...covered in vines and spiderwebs. It was high, so Yae would have a hard time cleaning it alone.

She walked outside, made a lap around the can, and went back in. *A decent amount of work will be necessary if I actually want to live here...* If they were only staying for a few days, it would probably do as long as they could secure a place to sleep. But if their stay stretched to a week or a month, it would be a different story.

A bathtub and a toilet are essential. Her instincts were still strongly influenced by her previous life in that regard. Unlike her last world, however, civilization here hadn't developed very far. But the divine power possessed by Blessed Natures did much to fill those gaps. One example was the closet Yae used as a refrigerator in her Whiskey House. The round, paperweight-like quartz pieces placed inside functioned as ice packs, and they were cooled with divine power. The quartz pieces could also be heated and used to warm bathwater or power lamps.

Yae understood divine power as similar to having a psychic ability. The power could control wind, start fires, and freeze things, and because it could be used in place of electricity and gas, it had become a necessary part of daily life. Everyone had a variety of different types of minerals that could be cooled or heated for a fee. The cheapest and most commonly used was quartz.

What to do? Water won't be a problem because we're right next to a river. I should be able to dig a well, too. But all my quartz pieces were sent with my luggage to Miya Province... Those would have to be bought. The problem was she didn't have any money. As soon as that thought crossed her mind, she remembered the pile of silver walnuts still lying outside.

...I'll check to see if they've actually turned into metal, she thought. She was about to set the broom down and head out when Sui, now awake, rushed inside.

"Yae!" he shouted.

"Huh?!" Yae responded, taken aback by his enthusiasm. At the same time, he closed the distance between them and clapped his hands on her shoulders.

"My body feels heavy!"

"What?! Heavy?"

"My flesh is back!" Sui said, cheeks flushed, to a flabbergasted Yae. "My body has been hollow all this time. It felt so light I thought for sure I was going to shrivel up, but now I'm heavy! I can feel my hands and feet again, and best of all, I can see color!"

"Um... So the deformation was cured?" Yae asked.

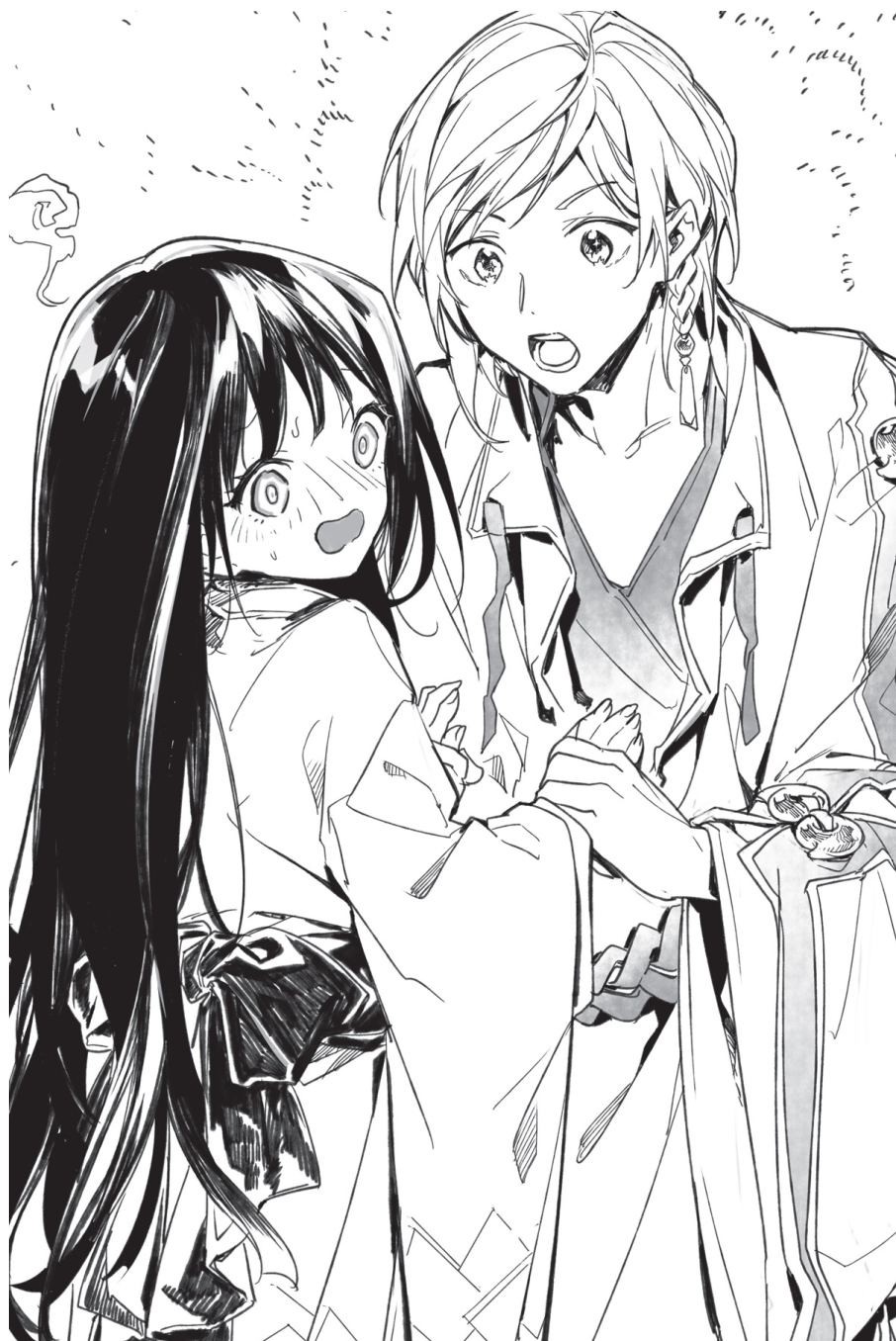
"Yeah, look at this!" he shouted, and he stripped off his robe without warning. When he undid his sash and, disturbingly, started to drop his pants, Yae's eyes went wide.

"Wait, no, keep your pants on, I don't need to see down there! Aaaah, I'm sorry, Arai, this is all a misunderstanding!" Yae screamed. She tried to turn around, but Sui grabbed her wrists.

"Touch me, Yae! Come on, feel my flesh!" Sui insisted.

"Nooo, nooooo!" she yelled pathetically, sounding like a trembling lamb.

Sui, bristling with excitement, paid her protests no mind and pushed her hands against his cheeks. He then slid them down to his neck, his shoulders, and his chest. Actually, it was more like she was being forced to grope him. “Your skin is really taut,” Yae praised amid the chaos, unsure of what to do. She almost died from embarrassment when she accidentally scratched him in the middle of the chest. *Aren’t the guy and girl usually reversed in this kind of situation...?!*



Next, he slid Yae's hands down his abdomen and to his waist. The area around his waist was surprisingly firm, and his abs were gorgeous. Yae screamed again.

"My thighs were in the process of petrifying as well," he said.

"I get it, you're healed, congratulations, couldn't be happier! Now please let me go..." Yae pleaded, on the verge of tears. Just as Sui let go of her wrists and she thought she was free, he pulled her in and hugged her tight.

"Thank you, Yae." His eyes, now at point-blank range, were shining so brightly that she thought they might produce rainbows. His smile was one of pure, unadulterated joy. Yae was speechless; she even forgot to breathe. "I love how it feels to be whole; I'd forgotten what it felt like. You're amazing, Yae. Simply amazing. I have a pulse."

"Uh, mm-hmm..." she responded in a daze just before Arai rushed into the can.

"What was that weird shrieking?! ...Sui? You woke up... Huh? Why are you half-naked?" he asked, perplexed.

"Brother! Touch me!" Sui shouted, leaving Yae and hugging Arai with a beaming smile. He made his brother touch his body just as he had with her. Arai looked stunned.

"I wonder if I'll be able to feel the coldness of water, too? I'm going to the river!" Sui left Arai in a state of shock and sprinted outside, frolicking like a child. Yae felt like a tornado had just passed through. She walked toward Arai, who was similarly tense.

"...Was he actually healed?" he asked.

"Seems so," Yae answered, staring at Arai.

"I have a pulse. You're amazing, Yae." Sui's words had made her chest feel warm. *I'm amazing? Me? I made someone think that I'm amazing. I made someone so happy that it looked like their eyes were going to shoot out rainbows.* She suddenly felt a pain in her chest. But it was different from the pain she had felt before.

"Um, Arai... Thank you." The words had escaped her mouth before she realized it. Words shouldn't have a taste, but her mouth was filled with a sweetness like nectar. Arai looked confused as to why he was being thanked.

"Yeah, um... In any case, thank you." The words tumbled from her mouth again, and Yae felt her whole body fill with warmth. "You were the one who killed the corpse bug, and I only drove it out of his body, but... Still, I feel amazing, like I've done something I can be truly proud of."

For that one moment in which she saw pure joy on Sui's face, it felt like the anger and dejection she felt toward the Miya Province men and the helplessness she felt when Arai had tried to kill her were

expelled from her heart without a trace.

“I’m glad that I met you two, and that I was able to free you from the stone monument,” she said. No matter what specific circumstances had led to this moment, she knew none of it would have happened without Arai.

He stared at her unblinkingly, then took a step back as if frightened. That returned her to her senses.

“Uh, sorry, that was probably weird of me to say... Sui’s excitement must have rubbed off on me. Forget about it. I’m going to, um, go outside and...look at the silver!” Yae blurted, flustered, and walked past a still-speechless Arai.

The sunlight stung her eyes when she walked outside. It was so bright that she could cry.



Afterward, she collected Sui, who was diligently playing in the river, and Arai, who was still slightly dazed, and set them to work cleaning the can with her. They were currently taking their one break before sunset.

“You’re sure that’s real silver, right?” Yae asked.

“Yes, it has definitely turned to metal,” Sui declared. He was skilled at distinguishing all things related to curses and assured her there was no issue with the silver. “Nevertheless, I would never have thought a corpse bug would change into valuable silver.”

“There are so many uses for it—personal accessories, magical tools, medicine... We would be better off keeping the source secret,” Arai said meaningfully. The brothers exchanged a look, but Yae had a more pressing question.

“Does that mean it’s okay to use it to buy daily necessities and food?” she asked. Arai and Sui looked puzzled. “You’re a Blessed Nature, right, Sui? Can you use thaumaturgy to cool and heat quartz? I’d also like you both to help me with remodeling the Can House—the mysterium, that is. I think I want to make this my base until I decide what to do with my life going forward.”

She looked at the brothers hopefully, and they smiled. They seemed impressed by her toughness.

“...A-and you both can live here, too, if you want,” Yae added shyly. She wanted to kick herself for not being able to skillfully ask for their company.

Sui, kind as always, picked up on the parts Yae couldn’t voice, and his smile shone even brighter. “We will stay by your side.”

“...I was released for your sake, so I’m not going anywhere,” Arai said, though with slight hesitation. He met Yae’s gaze and looked away as if troubled.



For the next few days, they found themselves very busy with remodeling the Can House and exterminating wild animals and shades that had started to appear in the area. The frequency of shades was especially high, possibly because of the number of mysteriums.

Despite this relationship with shades, it was important to remember that mysteriums were different from objects afflicted by deformation. Mysteriums had simply drifted here from another world—likely Yae’s original world—and were enlarged. Deformation was an illness unique to this world. That meant anything with a vague presence in this world, like Yae and the mysteriums, was not going to catch it. The tiger brothers’ souls were recycled and reborn in this world just like Yae, but they had almost entirely lost the memories of their old lives, making them susceptible.

One thing that made deformation difficult to deal with was that it didn’t only affect humans and animals; even plants and objects could catch it. Some of the shades that the brothers caught were able to be saved. Some were inanimate objects such as an old mirror, and others were wild animals. Some of them even turned out to be spirits. They let the animals go, but they gladly made use of the mirror and other tools that could be used in the house.

The problem was the spirits. Not all of them took human form. Some of them even lacked the intelligence of humans. Naturally, they needed to be handled with care. Some fled once they regained their sanity, and others attacked. Occasionally, they left jewelry as thanks for healing them. Arai and Sui took these items of value to passing peddlers to exchange for cloth and food.

And that was probably how word of Yae and the two brothers got out.

V A Past Tangled and Unresolved

Ten days had passed since Yae was supposed to be married off to a man of Miya Province. It was the height of summer—when the green was at its thickest.

The three of them were out looking at the mysteries around the Can House, checking if there were any they could clean up for use as storehouses or dwellings, when Yae noticed several human figures atop a steep cliff. She only got a glimpse of them through the trees, but they looked like large men. Arai and Sui had noticed them even before Yae did, and after exchanging a glance, they raced up the cliff.

The men from Miya Province flashed in Yae's mind as she watched the brothers go. She remembered how brave and vigorous they had appeared and felt a tinge of pain in her chest. *Guess I haven't completely gotten over those feelings.* The burning anger and sadness she had felt immediately after being abandoned, however, was gone. *There's so much to do these days I barely even think about it.*

Now that she had decided she would be staying here for a while, she was totally occupied with making the Can House into a comfortable living space. The river was close by, but she still wanted a well in the house. She planned to put a bathtub and toilet in the glass bottle next to the Can House once it had been cleaned. She was immensely grateful that the brothers had divine power. It was going to be so convenient having ready access to a substitute for gas and electricity.

After that, she wanted a hammock. She wanted to make a couch and a dresser, too. Since being reborn in this world, Yae had become quite proficient as a do-it-yourselfer.

I'll need to get tools somewhere... It sucks that proper iron tools are so expensive. Thank you, silver walnuts! I should be able to buy a fair amount of items with those. Japan was slow to develop iron manufacturing, and the same goes for this world. To start with, there's not enough iron ore or people with the technical knowledge to craft it. Tataara furnaces are incredibly scarce... I'll ask Arai and Sui to cut down some trees for

wood... *The first priority is preparing the bathtub and toilet.*

Arai had already sneaked into Kaki Province once to get cloth and ironware from her Whiskey House, but they would need a lot more than that. As Yae worried over the remodeling plans for the Can House, the tiger brothers returned from the cliff and changed back into their human forms.

"Who was it?" she asked. It could have been people from a nearby province who noticed their presence and came to scout. Or bandits passing through by chance, or random outsiders. Maybe they were lost. Yae leaned forward as she asked, and the brothers patted her on the head in turn.

"Some morons from who-knows-where," Arai answered.

"Yes, something like that. We drove them away, so you don't need to worry about them," added Sui.

They clearly didn't intend to tell Yae who the men were. But if they had decided that she didn't need to know, she would trust them. They were doing a good job as her bodyguards.

They've both been really nice to me ever since I cured Sui's deformation. It felt like they had accepted Yae as a person. That said, she occasionally saw a conflicted expression on Arai's face, as if he wanted to tell her something. Yae, too, found it difficult gauge the right distance in their relationship.

I wonder how long they'll stay with me. There was a possibility Arai would try to kill her again should the chance arise. He still hadn't told her the reason he'd tried to murder her before, which made it difficult to trust him completely. But despite how dangerous he was, she was still unable to tell him to stay away. *And besides, I feel like doing that would only provoke his desire to kill me...*

Realistically, Yae wouldn't be able to live here alone without their help. So there was no choice but to build trust over time.

As Yae fretted over their relationship, Arai ran his eyes over the surrounding area. "By the way, Yae, how about giving this land a name?"

Yae tilted her head. "You want me to name it?"

Arai knew that when she was in Kaki Province, Yae had performed Appellation on plants that showed signs of deformation. He had been near her as Kuroashi back then, and he had had many opportunities to see her writing down their names and creating labels.

"Yeah. Deciding a boundary and demonstrating that this place has a name will give it power. Shades wander aimlessly into this area now, but once the land is imbued with that power, their numbers should decrease dramatically," Arai explained. Yae was impressed by his levelheaded suggestion.

"I was always making signposts in Kaki Province, wasn't I?" There

were also animal statues set at the edges of the province. They were probably meant to serve as guards. This world was not like Japan, where cities and towns were clearly separated and maintained. And that was true of roads as well. As soon as people stopped walking on them, they became overgrown with weeds. The border between forest and province quickly became unclear, so there was a need to prepare statues and signposts to mark where people lived in an easy-to-understand way.

More than people, nature was the center of this world. As if to prove it, the mountains were thick and layered with green. Falcons soared through a sky that stretched upward without end. After letting out a breath, Yae gazed at Arai.

“Wouldn’t the land receive much more power if you two did it?” she asked. They were originally gods of great divinity, so she figured they would be a much better fit for this sort of task.

“If we perform the naming, this place will come to resemble a sacred realm. Are you okay with that?” Arai asked seriously. Yae glanced around to avoid his gaze.

“...What would that look like, out of curiosity?”

“Do you want me to say it would be paradise? Or hell? It all depends on the heart of the beholder. Either way, it would become the kind of place where people and beasts suffer divine punishment if they enter or take lives without permission. The land would curse them regardless of what Sui or I want. The air will warp, beasts will become spirits—”

“Fine. I’ll do it,” Yae interrupted. The power of gods was frightening. *It’s a bit late to worry about this, but will I really be okay living with these two...? My soul won’t be destroyed, will it? I won’t turn into a spirit, right?*

Arai ignored her unease and spoke in a carefree tone. “No one should have a problem with us settling here, right? The only things here are abandoned mining tunnels and mysteries that most people avoid. Nothing anyone would get upset over losing.”

Yae agreed with a sigh. The west side of Mount Yagi, which faced Mount Saeba and all its forbidden grounds, was untouched land—or rather, land that had long since been abandoned. The Great Protector was the ruler of the country of Izumo, but each province was essentially ruled by its chief. The chiefs were allowed to manage their provinces however they wished as long as they didn’t disadvantage the Great Protector. Conflict between provinces was also tolerated. Most chiefs devoted themselves to protecting and developing their provinces, and they usually didn’t concern themselves with other provinces unless they were left with no other choice. Provinces made up of belligerent Wild-Natured people were a little different, but even

they wouldn't invade forbidden ground.

So long as Yae didn't do anything to shake the foundations of the country, it was unlikely anyone would take issue with her living here and keeping to herself. Every country had outsiders. But Yae wasn't a chief, and she felt a little awkward naming the land as if she owned it.

"Do it, Yae," Arai ordered, crossing his arms, and Yae groaned. Sui, meanwhile, was enjoying himself braiding her hair and inserting flowers in silence.

What would be a good name? She reached for the leather bag tied at her sash—the waist bag was a favorite of hers that she had had Arai retrieve from her Whiskey House—and pulled out a small pouch. It was filled with dried raspberries and pears that she had made just the other day. All she had done was pick fruits growing nearby, cut them up casually, and dry them for a few days, but they made for nice snacks.

Arai and Sui started fidgeting upon seeing the dried fruits, and she tossed some to them. Yae chewed on some herself as she thought. The problem was she didn't have a sense for naming. She doubted *little corner* or *land under the cliff* would be good enough. *Dried pears sure are delicious*, she thought. Pears... The Japanese word for pear is *nashi*. She could reverse the syllables and make it *Shina*.

"...What about Sh-Shina?" she suggested. Regret over choosing something so simplistic filled her chest before the name even reached her lips, causing her to stumble over it.

"Shishina?" Arai responded.

"Ah, no, that's not—," Yae blurted as the brothers cocked their heads in thought.

"It's good enough for me. Shishina it is," Arai said before drawing kanji that matched the syllables in the air.

"I like it. I think it would make a powerful word for charms. It sounds like a place that gods would one day settle," Sui added, contemplating the name and giving it a stamp of approval that Yae found a little frightening the more she thought about it.

Is that really okay? Well, it's not my fault if anything terrible happens. Having no desire to think about the name any further, Yae elected not to argue and tossed dried fruit into the brothers' mouths. Arai and Sui took a great liking to the snack, and from that day forward, they began to pester her for it on a regular basis.

Yae decided she would make dried fruit soaked in honey once their lives settled down.



After being bestowed its new name, Shishina received several more visits from the suspicious human figures. The third time it happened, Yae finally got a clear look at them and realized for certain that they were men from Miya Province. There was little doubt Yae was their reason for coming here. And being coldly driven off by Arai and Sui was doing nothing to quell their attempts to contact her.

One afternoon, the men appeared again and watched Yae from the shade of the trees atop the cliff. The reason they weren't coming any closer was probably because the brothers had carved a symbol into the trees there on the day they named the land. The symbol was the character for "gate," and it seemed to serve as a boundary marker.

Yae was working hard on cleaning the lidded glass bottle next to the Can House when they appeared. Arai was napping on a handmade hammock outside the soda can, and Sui was away looking for food.

His intuition sharp as ever, Arai snapped awake and got down from the hammock upon sensing the men's presence. "Don't go anywhere," he said as he started off to send them away, but Yae stopped him.

"They're men from Miya Province looking for me, aren't they?" she asked.

"Beats me," Arai replied curtly.

Yae had been going along with the brothers' decision to repel the men immediately every time, but watching in silence was getting harder for her to do. She grabbed the ends of the heavenly garment hanging around Arai's shoulders and looked into his face.

"I'm going to try talking to them," she said.

"Why? You don't need to," Arai protested.

"I was supposed to marry a man over there, so they might want to know that I'm safe."

"Really?" He frowned and looked down at her. "Don't try to pretend you're okay with things you aren't by acting like you're being rational."

Yae gulped. Arai's words could be scathingly direct sometimes. She could tell by his expression that he didn't mean to offend, but that made the wound to her heart even deeper.

"I don't know if they've come here to find out if you're alive or not, but it's been way too long," he continued. Those last few words carried heavy emotion. "They first showed up here a full ten days after they abandoned you. If they were actually concerned for your safety, they would've come looking for you sooner."

"...Yeah."

"If they're just now starting to search for you after leaving you for dead all this time, they must have an ulterior motive. They don't care about you, and they don't have a guilty conscience, either."

"I know," Yae answered quietly, feeling bitter. It really had been too long. Even if they were looking for her, that wasn't going to bring her any joy at this point. The wound that had just started to close would only get wrenched open again. She didn't want to remember that pain, so she wished they would just leave her alone. Unfortunately, however, her old habit of putting up with a little pain in the hopes that people would come to like and need her was rearing its ugly head again.

"Yae?" Arai looked at her quizzically. Yae extended a hand to brush away the thick bangs over his eyes, but she stopped before she reached him.

"Even if that's true, I think it would be best to hear them out, at the very least. They might have come back this many times because something terrible has happened. Depending on what it is, it could affect our lives here. Anyway, it doesn't seem like they have ill intent..." She trailed off.

"Don't give me that stupid smile," Arai interrupted coldly. Yae realized her expression had become strained. "I'm tired of repeating myself. You are my life. That means I'll eliminate those you hate. Don't lie to me about what's in your heart."

Yae listened to him with mixed feelings. She was of course happy and relieved to hear him declare so definitively that he was her ally. That relief was joined by a feeling of gloominess, however. *Arai himself once tried to kill me, and he refuses to tell me why. Can I really believe that was only because he was mad at me for trying to make him submit during the ceremony?*

Yae had thought the misery she felt when she was almost killed had begun to fade, but if she looked deep inside her heart, it was still present as a hazy, smoldering feeling. It actually seemed that the more time passed and the closer she got to Arai, the more the image of his shining blade swinging down on her without hesitation weighed on her heart.

"I've decided. I'm going to go talk to them," Yae declared, disguising her stubbornness by acting like it was the rational thing to do, exactly as Arai had said she would. She pretended she didn't notice his scowl and let go of his garment. She then looked up the cliff and waved slightly at the men.

When they saw Yae's signal, the men moved at once. Two of them emerged from the trees and began to skillfully descend the uneven face of the cliff. She heard the faint neighing of horses, but it seemed like they had been left on top of the cliff. That might mean there were more people up there staying behind.

Yae started toward them as well and stopped next to a giant tortoiseshell fountain pen mystery that was jutting out from the

ground. Arai followed her, showing open displeasure. Yae felt a little bad about how coldly she had acted toward him, but apologizing didn't feel right, either, so she was at a loss for words.

The two who appeared before them were a man in his mid-twenties and a boy in his late teens. In this world, those in their upper teens were treated the same as adults. They were both taller than Arai and had thick waists and arms. Their impressive physiques left little doubt they were Wild Natures. They both wore robes the color of hydrangeas closed tightly around their necks and matching pants. It was summer, so the fabric was thin.

The man in his twenties had short black hair and green eyes. His eyebrows were thick and bold, and his lips were shapely. He was handsome and masculine and gave the impression of a black wolf. But despite his rough aura, his eyes had a shine of intelligence. Yae saw the interlocking circles of the ring crest in his green eyes and realized he was the man who had led her horse in the procession to Miya Province. He was most likely her intended husband.

The boy in his teens had chin-length white hair and red eyes. He was attractive as well and gave the impression of a strong young buck. He had splendid deerlike antlers on his head, which were a brilliant red to match his eyes, and in his eyes, which were long and narrow, he had a flower-shaped ring crest. His aura was somewhat prideful and standoffish. Unlike the green-eyed man, he seemed unable to hide his emotions, probably due to his youth, and he stared at Yae rudely with caution as well as curiosity.

"You're Yae of Kaki Province?" he asked in a sharp voice that could hardly be called friendly. There were no surnames in this world. When giving your name, you combined it with the province you lived in. Momoi was Yae's surname in her previous life, but she had never used it here. She only used her given name.

"Who's that man?" He looked at Arai standing next to her. "So you had a lover long before you were ever supposed to marry into our province. Guess giving us a used-up whore like you is Kaki Province's way of showing Miya Province how they *really* feel about us. Unbelievable..." He spat this scathing remark while regarding Yae out of the corner of his eye.

Arai, who had been standing with his arms crossed in irritation, moved to position Yae behind him and glared icy daggers at the boy. "Huh? Who do you think you are, you fucking brat? That's no way to speak to a lady. Should I cut out that filthy tongue of yours?"

Yae was grateful he was defending her, but that was really vulgar!

"What? You wanna repeat that?!" the boy responded venomously, and the green-eyed man stepped in to stop him. Yae also grabbed the heavenly raiment around Arai's shoulders and pulled him toward her.

“Please forgive his crass remarks. I am Hoodori of Miya Province. His name is Akanagi... You are Yae, correct?” This green-eyed man, Hoodori, was clearly the more skilled conversationalist between the two of them.

“Yes,” Yae responded, wary of where this discussion would lead. There was sincerity in his eyes as he looked at her. The interlocking circles of his ring crest were motionless; it was rare for crests to move like Arai’s and Sui’s.

“So this is what you look like,” he said with a sigh. Yae cocked her head in confusion, but then comprehension dawned. They were both wearing veils on that day and only saw each other’s eyes. “I was to be your husband.”

Yae’s voice caught in her throat, then she responded with a soft “I see.” The past tense meant that the arrangement was off.

“I won’t make any excuses. It wasn’t right of me to leave you behind like that, but I don’t think it was a mistake, either. It was a decision made to prevent the entire group from being killed,” he continued.

Yae couldn’t respond. She didn’t think she could accept that. *They think their actions were justifiable, but it was just plain evil to me.* Hoodori was probably fully aware of that already, of how Yae would feel.

Wild Natures typically had strong combat instincts. When placed in a critical situation, they decided immediately what they should abandon and what they should protect and acted on it. For that reason, his claim that it was neither right nor a mistake wasn’t that unreasonable. Yae might even have been able to accept it if she hadn’t been the one sacrificed. *This is really hard.* The truth was all the more painful for Yae with her desire to be needed.

“The hell are you saying, asshole?” Arai suddenly spat. He used a hand to lift Yae’s head, which she had unconsciously lowered, and glared directly at Hoodori. “Don’t make excuses for your own weakness and then expect Yae to go along with it. Just tell it like it is. You abandoned her because you decided she was worthless. There’s nothing else to it.”

“Way to dig at my deepest anxieties...,” Yae said, shocked. Was this tiger man *trying* to humiliate her even more?

“...Hey, you’re the one who’s going too far,” growled the red-eyed boy—Akanagi—in a deep voice. There was real malice in his eyes.

“I only spoke the truth. He left her behind because he was weak. That’s his own fault. It doesn’t matter if what he did was a mistake or not,” Arai declared plainly.

“You bastard...” Akanagi seethed.

“But I’m strong,” Arai boasted. “I’m strong, and I would never abandon Yae. Her worth and her Nature don’t matter.” He let go of

Yae's chin and pat her on the head, using way too much strength. "Even if she was useless, what you should do then is help her grow. No one in this world is truly worthless."

Yae ground her molars. Arai's words satisfied her desire for approval from others. That made her happy, but the fact that he once tried to kill her was like a spoonful of mud in her heart.

"...Nice lecture, old man. I'm just about ready to fall asleep," Akanagi said, intending to provoke. Arai scowled, clearly angry now. "Is this guy really your secret lover? He's clearly not from Kaki Province," he questioned Yae fiercely without taking his eyes off Arai.

Arai glared at him, vertical creases forming between his brows. He had the expression of a menacing beast. "I don't see why I should politely introduce myself to some wuss whose bark is worse than his bite."

"Hey, Arai! Let's stay calm!" Yae said, raising her voice in panic. He really was foulmouthed. His words had put all thoughts of the past out of her mind in an instant.

Arai glanced down at Yae, oblivious to the situation. "Huh? What are you so down about? You never would've gotten me if this spineless coward hadn't abandoned you, right? You should be celebrating. Come on, be happy."

Spineless coward. She wondered how many people would have the guts to announce they were happy after hearing a rant like that in such a dicey situation. Yae went pale, hoping he would shut his mouth, but Arai ignored her and threw out his chest.

"...Who is he?" Hoodori asked Yae, unable to hide his suspicion. He looked more concerned about Arai's temperament than his identity.

Yae groaned internally. She didn't want to make a big deal out of it, but explaining would be difficult. Arai was a golden tiger elebeast whom she originally met as Kuroashi during a ceremony. He'd likely originated as some kind of god of exceptional divinity in another world, and he had been sealed in a stone monument together with Lady Bihin. There was no way they would believe her if she said all that.

"You two sure are persistent... I'm Arai, and I belong to Yae," Arai answered in annoyance, pointing his thumb at her. Yae gasped.

"Arai, don't..."

"Yae set me free, body and soul. That's why as long as light remains in my eyes, I kneel to her. Yae is my life." Yae was speechless, and Hoodori and Akanagi stared in mute amazement. Arai spoke boldly, without a hint of shame. "My soul is bound in service to her, so any insult against Yae is an insult against me. You'd best remember that."

Arai was causing an embarrassing misunderstanding. The two men looked at Yae dubiously, doubtlessly wondering what kind of sordid affair she and Arai were involved in. By “body and soul,” Arai had only meant that she cleansed him of impurity and freed him, but his wording was horrible. *They must think I’m some kind of pervert...*

Yae forced herself to speak. “...Um. We met on the day of the wedding procession. He happened to be passing through the forest after you left me behind, and he saved me. It’s true that he’s strong... extraordinarily so, but as you can see, he’s a little eccentric. Please don’t take what he says seriously.”

“Who are you calling eccentric?” Arai pouted, but Yae didn’t look at him.

“After he saved me...I couldn’t show my face back home, since I had betrayed the chief’s expectations... And when I was troubled about what to do next, Arai found this place for me. He doesn’t have a place to return to, either, so we’ve been living here together,” she continued, explaining their current situation without letting Arai share any unnecessary details. She didn’t trust Hoodori and Akanagi, so there was no need to tell them everything.

“He doesn’t have a place to return to? What province is he from?” Akanagi asked, plainly skeptical.

“He lived independently from the provinces,” Yae answered quickly, and she decided to ask her own question before they could pursue that topic any further. “I was planning on going back to visit Kaki Province when the opportunity arose... But anyway, why have you two approached us so many times? Shouldn’t I be as good as dead to you?”

They’d left her as a decoy to the shades, so they should have assumed she was dead. Maybe they set out to find her body, to at least hold a memorial service, and got word from a peddler who had contact with Arai and Sui. It wasn’t impossible to imagine that Chief Kadaru had requested a search...but that possibility felt slim.

“We were looking for you because you were supposed to marry into our province, obviously,” Akanagi spat angrily.

Directly after he spoke, Arai thrust his sword at Akanagi. There was no time at all between the sound of him drawing the blade and the steel finding the boy’s neck. The Miya Province men were both warriors, but it happened so fast that neither of them had time to respond.

“An enemy of Yae’s is an enemy of mine. That’s more than enough chatter out of you,” Arai said coldly. He had taken Akanagi’s words as mockery. He was backing up his earlier claim that an insult against her was an insult against him. If not for the pinch of gloominess she felt when she looked at him, she might’ve fallen for him right there.

“...You can probably kill me, but Hoodori will kill you right afterward,” Akanagi said. He was young, but he was a Wild Nature. He read the situation calmly without minding the sharp touch of the blade and spoke to keep Arai in check. There was no sign of his earlier immaturity.

“I have no intention to fight here. Lower your sword,” Hoodori said to calm both Arai and Akanagi. “The chief of Kaki Province asked us to at least find your body. The women we brought home were also angry we left you behind.”

Yae was truly surprised to hear that. “It wasn’t just Oshiro and the other women? Chief Kadaru demanded that Miya Province search for me, too?” she asked, and this time, Hoodori looked surprised.

“They are concerned for their friend. I also heard that you are the chief’s adopted daughter... Is it so surprising that he would be worried about you?”

“Well, no, but...” She had felt disbelief before anything else. Yae’s own reaction was like a shot through her heart. *I wanted to be liked and accepted, but I didn’t trust Chief Kadaru and the others one bit. I was so sure they would act only for their own duty and profit...*

Before suspiciously fishing for the ulterior motives of those around her, she should have just said what she wanted—to return home—and acted on her wish. Yae ended up isolating herself because she couldn’t even do something so simple. *I’ve been an idiot. The biggest idiot in the world.*

“That’s why it was decided I would marry you.”

Akanagi’s unexpected remark jolted her attention back to them.

“...What was that?” Arai said threateningly. Yae took the sword and scabbard from his hands to stop him. She returned the blade to the scabbard, held it in her arms, and looked to Akanagi and Hoodori for explanation. Akanagi let out a sigh of relief. It must have been nerve-racking having that blade pointed at him.

“We thought you were long dead. But no matter how much we searched the mountain, we didn’t even find a single bone. Then after a few days, one of the elders unfortunately contracted deformation,” he explained.

“...Deformation?” Yae responded, confused. She didn’t like where this was going.

“The elder is a Blessed Nature, and he has divine power. As soon as he lost control of that power, a number of strange events began to occur.”

“And...?” Yae honestly wondered what, if anything, that had to do with her.

“You’re Natureless, but you’ve always worked as a medium, right?”

“Huh? ...Yes.”

A medium was a person who served the gods and conveyed their will to the people. It was the truth that she had served as the envoy for the ceremonies in Kaki Province for a long time.

“The Miya Province elders place great value on the might of the gods. The others began to make a fuss about how leaving a medium to die must have caused the elder’s deformation,” Akanagi explained, grimacing as if he had a headache. He clicked his tongue. “The women who married into our province joined in, and even the chief of Kaki Province began demanding that we search for you...”

Yae felt herself start to smile but held it in. She was sure Kadaru had celebrated internally at such perfect timing. She could hear him threatening Miya Province now: *Yae can perform Appellation, and she served as our medium for many years, so she has a pure soul. She may be Natureless, but I thought she would be of help to your land, and I let go of her with a heavy heart. It’s no wonder you are suffering disasters if you left a girl like her to die...*

“While searching for your body, we heard something strange from a peddler passing through the mountain. He said a young man and woman had begun living in a ‘silent land.’ We checked it out in disbelief, and here you are, the dead girl we were supposed to be looking for.”

“Are people really calling this a ‘silent land’? That sounds ominous,” Yae said with an expression of displeasure, and Akanagi glared at her. He looked like he wanted to say that was hardly the issue. Arai looked at her reproachfully as well, upset over having his sword stolen.

“The elder who caught deformation is a member of my family. That’s why they decided I would marry you.”

Oh, that’s how it happened, Yae thought, everything clicking into place with Akanagi’s explanation. The role of Yae’s husband was shifted from Hoodori to Akanagi to appease the elders’ fears, calm Oshiro and the women, and show sincerity to Kaki Province. *Akanagi must have been hoping I was dead.* She resisted the urge to sigh. As a Wild Nature, having to marry a Natureless woman he felt no attraction to had to be painful.

No, wait a second.

“If the elder is a Blessed Nature, does that mean you are, too?” she asked.

“No. My mother was a Wild Nature, and I inherited that from her,” Akanagi answered.

“...Oh.” If he had been anything other than a Wild Nature, he wouldn’t have been so disappointed to have a Natureless woman as his wife. She had thought there might be a little room for him to

accept her in that case, but things were never that easy.

"Why do I have to marry such a...?" Akanagi muttered, sounding as if he wished she would just lie down and die. Yae stiffened.

"You have it backward, kid," Arai objected coldly. "The question is why does Yae have to marry a pathetic wimp like you? As if I'd let you have her."

Confusion drove the pain in Yae's chest out of her mind. Arai was acting very possessive of her, but that was only because she had been the one to release him. After being reborn in this world, he had also come to possess a Wild Nature, and he didn't show any sign of attraction to the Natureless Yae. That enabled her to live in peace with him and his brother, but it made her feel a little empty as well.

"...I understand that this is a selfish request, but I ask that you come with us to our province. It would be a great help if you could simply tell the elders that you have nothing to do with the disasters. After that, we will do as you like," Hoodori said, forcing the conversation ahead as if trying to prevent Arai and Akanagi from coming to blows. "If you can't forgive Miya Province—if you can't forgive me who was to be your husband—I gladly offer you my life."

Hoodori suddenly knelt on the spot.

"Huh?! No, I don't need that. I understand the situation!" Yae shouted, startled by Hoodori's sudden invitation for her chop off his head. Arai clicked his tongue.

"Go ahead and chop it off," he said.

"I'm not doing that. Stand up, Hoodori. I don't want you to pay with your life," she said, hurriedly pulling Hoodori up. She never would have imagined that he had come with that kind of resolve.

"I can't ask you to trust us right away after we abandoned you. But if you are able to swallow your anger and marry into our province as per the original agreement, we would of course welcome you." Hoodori glanced at the sulking Akanagi. "He may appear rude, but he is not used to women, so please forgive him. Despite his behavior here, he is a kindhearted young man."

"...Huh?! What's that? Why the hell do I have to clean up the mess you all made?!" Akanagi shouted with flushed cheeks, his white hair swaying as he turned to look at Yae.



Hoodori ignored him and addressed Yae casually. "If you would rather stick with me, that would be no problem."

Even being told she had the right to choose her husband did nothing to lower Yae's guard. Arai had the same reaction.

"Oh, how *generous* of you. Yae, let's kill them. You can feed their meat to the birds," he said. This tiger man's thirst for blood was a little concerning.

"Hey, like I want to marry some woman who's been sullied by her secret lover...", Akanagi said wearily.

"Don't call me her lover. Our relationship is nothing so trifling. Yae and I are connected on a much deeper level," Arai snapped in response.

"Will you shut up? Who *are* you?!"

"What's that, now?! I'm a god! Show some respect!"

"Like hell you are!"

Akanagi and Arai glared at each other again. This was mostly Arai's fault for riling him up unintentionally. He had meant what he said about their relationship and his identity entirely literally, but his wording invited misunderstanding.

"Those antlers mean you're a deer elebeast, right? Yae, how do you feel about venison?" Arai asked, watching Akanagi with the eyes of a ravenous tiger.

"Ha-ha, bring it on. If you think you can kill me, go ahead and try! My appearance causes me to be treated like a divine beast back home. If you kill me, you'll be hunted by the villagers of Miya Province for the rest of your life," Akanagi said threateningly.

"Why should I give a crap? Those wimps can't touch me. Let them come; I'll curse them all."

The mood had become frigid. Yae was troubled over how to respond as she watched their war of words from the sidelines. The truth was that she didn't want to go to Miya Province. She couldn't imagine the trip would end with a simple explanation to the elders. She was sure that once she arrived, they were going to use some twisted logic to demand something unreasonable from her.

That said, running will probably lead to more trouble down the line. The original purpose of the marriage arrangements was to bring unity between the two provinces. That meant Hoodori was likely chosen because he was one of the most excellent young men in the province. Despite his importance, he had readily offered his own life to quell Yae's anger. Miya Province desired her presence so badly that they were willing to trade his life and offer her a member of an elder's family in marriage in order to convince her to come.

Why? I'm not anywhere near that important of a person. Rejecting their request would not be a smart decision. She understood that, but

she was still reluctant.

“...Arai,” Yae whispered. Arai turned his head from Akanagi to look at her. She wondered if he would come to Miya Province with her. “I’m thinking of going to Miya Province to see Oshiro and the other women. I’d be grateful if you came with me.”

“Gotcha. You want me to come with you and slaughter the entire village. Count me in,” Arai responded.

“No, we’re not killing anyone.” Yae rejected his idea immediately. Come to think of it, Arai held a strong grudge against Miya Province... It sounded like he was willing to come with her, but she would have to be careful not to let him kill everyone in sight.

Yae made up her mind and turned to Hoodori. “I can’t promise everything will turn out the way you hope, but if that’s okay, I’ll come.”

“That is fine... I swear that this time, I will protect you,” Hoodori responded.

“Th-thank you.”

Yae didn’t think she would have any trouble sidestepping the marriage proposals, since those talks had essentially returned to square one. She had never taken the arrangement seriously in the first place.

Hoodori sighed in relief, and just then, a white tiger emerged from the trees with a basket full of pears hanging from his neck. The Miya Province men turned around simultaneously and drew the swords at their hips.

“It’s okay. He’s Arai’s brother.” Yae hurriedly stopped them, and they both frowned.

“...They are very strange elebeasts,” Hoodori said. Arai snorted.

“Like I said, I’m a kind of god... Doubt me all you want, but don’t insult me or my brother unless you want to be cursed.”

VI A Ghost Story from the Universe to You

After explaining the situation to a hesitant Sui, they made simple preparations for the journey and set off for Miya Province together. Arai and Sui both changed into their tiger forms; it was probably the most comfortable way for them to travel. Yae rode on the golden tiger's back, and the brothers entrusted their swords to her.

Just as she'd suspected, Hoodori and Akanagi had horses fastened to trees on top of the cliff. They said they could reach Miya Province in less than half a day if they rode without rest, but as the matter was not so urgent, they did not want to push the horses in a way that would shorten their life spans. Horses were difficult to raise on the rough terrain of Izumo. They were a valuable means of transportation, and Miya Province with its many warriors took especially good care of them.

Yae didn't talk to the men much during their journey. They camped near a stream after sunset and got moving again early the next morning. They stopped to rest several times along the way, and when the setting sun began to paint the contours of the distant mountains red, the group arrived in Miya Province.

Miya Province was located on the north side of Mount Yagi. It was a relatively large village situated in the valley between Mount Yagi and Mount Mebiro. In contrast to the terraced fields that climbed the slopes of Yae's hometown, this place was surrounded by rocky cliffs, meaning there were hardly any fields in sight. The villagers here were mountain people, and they lived in houses made of stone and timber built on different levels of the rock face. There were rope ladders and stairs built into the cliffs.

The village might have sounded primitive and dull by that explanation alone, but most of the buildings had a dignified elegance to their exteriors. Pillars rising from open verandas supported hipped roofs. The outer walls were painted a variety of colors, including white, red, and green, and the roofs were decorated to match. The cliff

face and its many buildings looked like the abode of gods, serving as visual proof that the elders truly did place great importance on divine will.

There aren't many mysteries here. Yae was studying the province's structure closely. She found the moss-covered faucet poking out from the cliff kind of funny, but that was the only mystery she saw. A large river ran through the valley, and there were storehouses on stilts dotting its edge. She saw river fish being dried on straw mats next to them. It seemed like the buildings down there were used to process food. The width of the river's bank on the Mount Mebiro side was narrow, and a thick forest ran from it to the foot of the mountain. The side facing them with the storehouses was a little wider and only featured sparse trees.

Yae was astonished by how much one village could vary from another. The golden tiger beneath her seemed to take no interest in the makeup of the village, and his ears twitched in boredom. Sui, meanwhile, was carefully watching the villagers as they emerged from buildings and gazed down at the visitors.

On the whole, people have more rugged builds here than in Kaki Province... Nature had a big influence not just on personality but also on appearance. Wild Natures made up the majority of Miya Province's population, and the people here possessed large frames, regardless of gender.

Hoodori and Akanagi rode to the riverbank and dismounted. The young boys who ran up to them looked in surprise at Yae and the golden tiger she was riding, then took the horses' reins and led them below the cliff. It looked like there was a stable over there.

"I apologize for rushing you," Hoodori announced, "but I would like for you to meet with the elders before you rest from the journey." He started walking toward wooden stairs built into the cliff face. Yae followed him and Akanagi without getting up from the golden tiger's back. The younger brother remained in his tiger form as well and followed the others.

"The elders are in a shrine on top of the cliff." Hoodori turned around to explain. That was when it began. A booming, rumbling noise reverberated through the area. Yae saw flocks of birds take off from the trees, fleeing.

She started. Arai also stopped and looked around as if on edge.

"Is the mountain rumbling?" she asked, and Hoodori and Akanagi made pained expressions.

Another ominous rumbling sound echoed. It sounded like the mountain was roaring. As soon as that thought crossed Yae's mind, a section of the forest on the Mount Mebiro side truly began to creak and shake.

“Huh...?!” Yae exclaimed loudly, forgetting all modesty, and watched closely. But she could see no cracks in the ground from the rumbling of the mountain. Instead, she saw a giant creature dozens of meters long fixed to the ground with rope. The rumbling noise seemed to be coming from the creature as it struggled to get up. It was as big as a dinosaur. Its body was coated in green, and giant trees grew on its back. She guessed from its build that it was some kind of wolf.

“Is that a villager from Miya Province...? Has the deformation gotten that bad?” Yae asked, startled. Deformation was an illness that led to death. Even if the victim lost themselves and transformed into a grotesque shade, in the end, they regressed and passed just like a person dying from old age. Death was peculiar in this world. The bones turned to wood and stone, and corpse bugs settled inside them. The body eventually became a part of nature. “Is the one with deformation the elder?”

“Yes,” Akanagi answered. He spoke calmly, the evening sun reflecting in his red eyes. “That swollen monster is Hotaru, the elder of my family. He’s old, but he was the picture of health, and there was no reason for his body to decline. Out of nowhere, he suddenly developed the symptoms of deformation and rapidly changed into that thing. We’ve tied him down, so he won’t cause any damage... And now, other elders are showing signs of deformation, too.”

“Other elders, too?” Yae repeated, surprised. Akanagi and Hoodori both nodded gravely. *This is really serious...* This explained why Hoodori was ready to give his life to bring her here. She doubted anyone had believed at the beginning that Hotaru caught deformation because some medium had been left to die. But the series of calamities had everyone in shock and trying anything they could think of. They must have been grasping at straws when they began searching for Yae.

“He’s massive... Was Lord Hotaru always this big?” she asked. It was rare, but some elebeasts were the size of a hill.

Akanagi shook his head coldly. “You really think any elebeast could be that big? He grew steadily larger as the symptoms of deformation worsened. He’s already lost his sense of self.”

Yae gasped. That last part was important. If he had lost himself, he couldn’t be saved.

“We’ve already lost all hope for Elder Hotaru’s recovery. Honestly, it would be a great help at this point if he would just die. But look at him. He’s huge... If we weren’t binding him with red rope, his divine power would overflow and flood the area like a tsunami. That would warp the atmosphere and invite calamity,” Akanagi said with a hard gaze. “We can’t let the province be destroyed. Some voiced the opinion that we should kill him, but the elder’s children protested vehemently. Those who agreed with his children tied him down with

red rope, but it's barely containing him. It only bought us a few days. If Elder Hotaru can be calmed, we'll let him regress to nature. If he can't, then we'll go ahead and seal him as a fallen god."

"If he's sealed, his soul won't be able to reincarnate..." Yae felt awkward saying that where the tiger brothers could hear, but it had to be brought up. Arai and Sui's souls were somewhat distorted, and they had lost their memories, but she believed they retained their power from their previous lives because they were sealed in this world and worshipped. In Hotaru's case, however, he would be sealed as a wicked fallen god. It would be a disgrace to his family as well. People would begin to avoid them as an impure bloodline.

"That's hardly important when the fate of our province is at stake," Akanagi responded in irritation.

Hoodori was ready to offer his life, and Akanagi had accepted a betrothal to the Natureless Yae. Now that she understood the gravity of the situation, she could see why they were willing to put up with that level of sacrifice in the hopes of resolving it.

That said, it was just as she thought—the disasters befalling Miya Province had nothing to do with her. *...Should I really go along with this? Am I acting out of a desire to be liked, just like I always have?* Yae asked herself, afraid she was repeating the same mistake yet again.

The ground roared a third time before she got her answer. She strained her eyes and saw red ropes between the swaying trees. She also heard the angry cries of people calling for vigilance. There were probably guards stationed around Hotaru.

The light of the setting sun made the trees of the mountain look like they were lighting up in flame. It was a divine and beautiful sight, but ominous as well. Hoodori and Akanagi seemed just as taken as Yae by the sight of the mountain like the surface of a scarlet ocean. They all fell silent, and in that moment, the earth rumbled even louder than before. Screams soon followed.

Villagers leaned out from the verandas of their cliff-face houses and pointed at Hotaru, shouting, "The ropes have come loose!" Hoodori's and Akanagi's faces tensed, and they stared at Hotaru.

A hateful howl filled the area. Just as the villagers had said, Hotaru was standing in defiance of the spiderweb of red ropes tied over his body. He truly looked like a monster as he howled again and again. He had the body of a wolf, but his face had already begun to transform, and his eyelids were round and swollen like a *dogu* figurine. His head had almost completely turned to wood, and vines were entwined even around the fangs of his roaring mouth.

Hotaru writhed, trying to break free from the remaining red ropes. The tree trunks on his back broke and fell from the effort. Yae could hear the screams of the people running around in confusion in his

vicinity.

Sui, who had remained a white tiger at Yae's side until now, resumed his human form. "I've never seen a person grow that large, even with divine power. I don't think there are many who surpass me and Arai in strength... Yae, I'm going to go down there and investigate," he said.

"What? That's dangerous!" Yae exclaimed.

"It's okay. I'm just going to look," he assured her cheerfully, then turned back into a tiger and nimbly raced along the cliff toward Hotaru.

"Akanagi, take Yae to safety. It will take some time to seal him. I'm going to go help," Hoodori commanded with a hard voice. Akanagi matched his tone.

"I should go, too. What'll we do if Elder Hotaru escapes and attacks another province?"

"We can't afford to lose you. You're a Wild Nature with divine power."

"What the hell does that matter? That won't mean a thing if we all die!"

As they argued with determined expressions, the golden tiger Yae was sitting on showed his boredom by yawning and scratching his claws at the wooden beams of the stairs at his feet. She tugged at his ears lightly to get him to stop digging at the knots in the wood. Arai hated Miya Province and probably didn't care what happened to it. Yae didn't have any attachment to this place, either, and she hadn't come because she wanted to. But watching people fly out of their houses in a panic and run toward Hotaru, she couldn't bring herself to say she wanted to go home.

Anyway, it wasn't Yae's turn to act. It would be best for her to evacuate as soon as possible. It was as she thought this that she heard a woman cry out, "Yae!" She turned toward the voice and saw a red-haired woman wearing a light-pink robe dash out from a house and run toward her. It was Oshiro.

"Lady Oshiro, you're safe," Yae said, getting down from the golden tiger's back.

Other women emerged after Oshiro, and they also ran toward her. They were all women who had married here from Kaki Province.

"I'm so glad to see you're safe, too, Yae! Geez, don't worry us like that! Do you have any idea how heartbroken we were, thinking you had died?!" Oshiro cried, throwing her body at Yae and wrapping her in a firm embrace. Akanagi and Hoodori stopped arguing at once and turned to watch Yae and the women.

"Sorry for worrying you, Lady Oshiro," Yae apologized. Oshiro hugged her so tightly that it hurt, and Yae softly patted her on the

back. Oshiro was just as beautiful on the inside as she was on the outside. She treated Yae with kindness even though Yae was Natureless and kept her distance from others.

“Oh, thank goodness. I’m so happy...,” Oshiro whispered in relief.

Bittersweet thoughts in her heart, Yae savored the warmth of Oshiro’s body. *I like Oshiro. I only ever wanted to like her.* She felt more ashamed than ever of the jealousy she felt toward her.

“...I’m glad you’re safe, but what on earth possessed you to come to Miya Province *now*?” Oshiro asked, suddenly lifting her face and glaring critically at Yae. “Can you believe this? These men abandoned you, and now just because some elder or something caught deformation, they’re saying you used your powers as a medium to curse the whole village! They said they needed to find your dead body and seal it. It made me so angry...!”

“Whoa, Lady Oshiro, that’s enough!” Yae interrupted quickly to get Oshiro to stop talking. *Oh, I see. The people of Miya Province made this out to be my fault after all!* She had more or less figured that would be the case, but Oshiro would harm her own position if Yae allowed her to voice that aloud here. She had always felt strong jealousy toward Oshiro, but above that, she had always liked her for her cheerful demeanor and willingness to speak frankly.

Yae may have been a former medium, but she couldn’t imagine that offering her to Hotaru would do anything to lessen the symptoms of deformation. The plan was probably just a sign of how desperate they were.

Would they be using me as a tool if I weren’t Natureless? The thought was a little depressing. Wild-Natured men were attracted to Gentle-Natured women. If Yae had been Gentle-Natured like the others, the men might have felt a little more conflicted in treating her as a sacrifice. The knowledge that their behavior was rooted in instinct rather than meaningless prejudice made it all the more unbearable.

Hoodori and Akanagi looked at Yae and the women with bitter expressions. It was then that the white tiger returned from going to look at Hotaru. Without turning back into his human form, he nuzzled Yae’s legs and then spoke in a troubled tone.

“The situation down there is bad. A charm on the ropes is preventing his divine power from escaping, but it can’t hold. There will be trouble if he breaks free. His divine power is terribly impure, and it won’t be long before the water in this area is tainted,” Sui explained.

“That’s weird. Deformation isn’t an illness that corrupts divine power,” Yae said in confusion, petting his white head. Arai bit Yae’s sleeve as if demanding she pet his head as well. She ruffled the fur on both their heads. It seemed they both appreciated pets while in their

tiger forms.

I haven't cursed Miya Province, and I don't have the power to do that in the first place. I can declare with confidence that I have nothing to do with it, but I can also tell that the elder's deformation is not normal. Yae pondered the situation as she petted Arai and Sui. Then one of the women tugged lightly at her clothes.

"Hey, Yae, can't you calm him? You were always the medium for the ceremonies back home," she said.

"Cut that out," Oshiro chided immediately in a strict tone. "What are we going to do if you all are deceived by their nonsense, too?"

...This is why I like her, Yae thought, looking at Oshiro with envy and affection. Oshiro embodied all of Yae's ideals. She was never afraid of making others hate her and clearly stated her opinion on things she didn't agree with.

"Yes, I think Yae might be able to soothe him to some extent. She could at least get him to stop flailing about," the white tiger answered casually. Everyone fell speechless for a moment.

"But Yae has no reason to help Miya Province. She only came here to speak to the elders," the golden tiger responded, sounding just as disinterested.

"Wait, who are these tigers? They look a little like Lord Kuroashi... They're not from Kaki Province, right? Are they elebeasts from somewhere else?" Oshiro asked, looking down at Arai and Sui in surprise. Yae dodged the question with a forced smile.

"Hey, are you really able to calm him?" Akanagi asked quickly, interrupting Oshiro, who looked as if she had more to say.

"U-uh, well, I don't actually know..." Yae faltered. There was no way to know if she truly could. The tiger brothers, on the other hand, were looking up at her with the trusting eyes of a pet dog as if to say *You calmed us, didn't you? You can do this.*

"Please," Akanagi said, his rude attitude gone as he grabbed Yae's hand with a serious expression. His hands were startlingly hot. "I'll do anything. Once this is over, you can chop off my head or sever all my limbs. I'll accept any condition. Please."

"You don't have to do it, Yae. You don't have any responsibility for this," Oshiro argued in opposition to Akanagi's entreaty.

It was Oshiro's words that made up her mind. She was truly worried about Yae. That was what made Yae want to do it if she could, despite what Oshiro was saying. Yae's position was in limbo between provinces after being cut off from both, but Oshiro had married into Miya Province. Yae couldn't stand the thought of Oshiro's life here being threatened.

And... And what else? *I'm not doing it out of a desire to be liked. I don't know how to put it, but it's not that.* Yae peered into her heart. She

wanted to do it even though she had people defending her and saying that she didn't. What should she call this feeling?

She had no idea that it would feel this refreshing to accept the goodwill of others at face value without trying to read into hidden meanings and motives.

"...I-I'm going to try," Yae muttered. Arai and Sui looked up at her with excitement in their eyes as if to say *You're going to kill him?* and *You're going to curse him?* respectively. She patted their heads to say *No, I'm going to calm him.*



Yae told herself to think of this as a ceremony for the time being. Calming Hotaru was the goal, so it wasn't a treatment, but a ceremony. Operating with that loose idea in her mind, Yae held Arai's black sword aloft as she crossed the bridge built over the river. Hotaru was on the other side. There were three red ropes remaining to tie him down, and if they broke, an extremely dangerous and impure shade would be unleashed on the world.

Arai and Sui walked at a steady pace to either side of her in their tiger forms.

"Uukara mikara enishimishi."

She was chanting a song used to stop a person from moving on to the afterlife. It was seen as a chant to prevent the departure of the gods. The enchantment was used during ceremonies performed after the various harvest festivals that were conducted from fall and into winter... And she was about to find out if it worked on a person who was turning into a shade.

"Uukara mikara mitsura tsuranami maashimashi."

...*Oh, shoot.* She hadn't sung this in a while and was unsure of the lyrics.

"Orogami origami naagome nagome yohahiyo mikotoyo iyasaka iyanaga."

Did I mess up a word? The tigers were really glaring at her.

"Abi sobi megushimegushi to saezuramu yareshiizume shizume kashikoshiyare."

She saw people desperately trying to wrap the torn red ropes back around Hotaru's giant body. They looked surprised when they noticed Yae. Hoodori, Akanagi, and a host of other burly men were following behind her. She could sense them even without turning around. They were probably planning to spring into action as soon as anything went wrong. She chose not to think about whether it would be the shade

Hotaru had become or her they would kill.

“Remember your clan, remember your bonds.”

The setting sun had already sunk below the mountains. Thoughtful villagers had built bonfires and lifted torches to provide light. Yae was grateful for that, but the flickering flames created a creepy atmosphere, which was enhanced by the slightly chilly air. The wind could make valleys feel cool at night even in the seventh moon, but this was different.

“Be still, honored spirit. Live prosperous and long.”

Hotaru stopped thrashing and fell still. He slowly turned toward Yae.

“Hear the kingfisher’s piteous song. Be calm, be calm.”

Yae knelt before him as she recited the enchantment and put the black sword on her knees. The sword was heavy. It wasn’t a long walk from the cliff to the river, but carrying it even that short distance had made her arms feel sluggish.

“I behold your existence.”

Yae put the fingers of both hands together to form a ring and used it as a window to check Hotaru’s form. If he looked equally transformed through this view, that would mean there was no hope of curing his deformation.

“Hmm...”

Cautiously, Yae looked through the finger window and saw Hotaru’s wavering, unstable form. It was as if she was seeing his transformed figure reflected on the surface of a body of water. The illness had infected his soul, which meant he was definitely in critical condition, but...she didn’t think it was hopeless.

“This must be very difficult, great sir,” Yae muttered softly without thinking, and Hotaru dipped his head and moved his face near her. Hotaru was currently as big as a dinosaur at dozens of meters long. That naturally made his face enormous as well, and fear welled within Yae as if a giant wall was suddenly closing in on her. She hastily grabbed the sword so it wouldn’t fall from her lap and leaned back.

Giant drops of water leaked from between Hotaru’s round, swollen eyelids. Yae knew they were tears, but each one was like the spilling of a large tub. *Don’t cry like that. You’ll cause a flood*, Yae thought as she reached out a hand and patted the mossy tip of his nose. It was hardening into a brown tree trunk.

Can I heal him? Yae asked herself, and she was struck by the thought that she was the only person who could. That thought didn’t arise from arrogance; it came from fear and conviction.

I want to heal him. Could she really do it? What would she do if she failed? She wanted to be able to heal him. She wanted so badly to

be a version of herself who could.

As if spurred on by seeing her pet Hotaru, the tiger brothers, who had been sitting calmly on either side of her, rubbed their faces into her shoulders and back, demanding that she pet them, too. Yae returned to her senses and gave them what they wanted.

“...Doctor,” a quiet voice called out. Yae turned around and noticed that a large crowd of Miya Province villagers had formed behind her. The voice came from a fluffy white wolf pup who had crawled through the legs of the others to reach her. They were an elebeast, but they appeared too young to take human form.

“Can you heal Grandpa?” the pup asked heartrendingly, and Yae began to think. This child was probably a member of the family who opposed Hotaru’s execution. The children apparently thought she was a doctor or a shaman because she had just performed what looked like an exorcism. She understood, however, that there was only a sliver of hope left for Hotaru and that his condition was too critical to make any predictions. She didn’t answer, and more fluffy wolves emerged from the legs of the crowd to surround her.

“Will you heal him, Doctor?”

“What should we give as an offering?”

“Please save Grandpa.”

The adorable furballs started to climb into her lap. Looking from their hopeful faces to the crowd of people watching her, she couldn’t possibly refuse. Yae pet the wolf pups and said, “Yes, I’ll do my best to heal him.”

The tiger brothers looked at her coldly as if unable to believe that she had let the wolf pups sway her, and the crowd behind her stirred with relief. Yae quickly regretted how weak-willed she was in yielding to the fluffy cuteness, but she also felt a faint sense of exhilaration.

It wasn’t a reckless decision made out of a desire to be liked. She just... *I want to turn sad faces into smiling ones. That’s right. All I ever wanted was to see a person smile from the heart...*



The day came to an end after a number of people worked together to tie back the red ropes and secure Hotaru to the ground while he was still docile. Yae was dizzy from having expended a lot of energy performing the ceremony rite, so she was allowed to cleanse herself and rest for the night. While watching her coldly, Arai and Sui remained in their tiger forms and sprawled out by her sides as if guarding her.

It was Miya Province custom to use a stack of plump futons as a bed rather than a hammock. Sleep took Yae immediately thanks to the fatigue and strain of the day.

However, an anguished howl from Hotaru awoke her in the middle of the night. The lack of rumbling from the earth meant he wasn't thrashing around, but the pain in his roaring voice sent a chill through her. If he cried like this every day, the people of Miya Province must also have suffered many worried, sleepless nights.

"...You moron," Yae heard from beside her. The golden tiger had slipped under the comforter and was looking at her with round, critical eyes. There was no way she would sleep next to him if he were in his human form, but she couldn't help herself when it came to fluffiness. The white tiger was sprawled out on the opposite side with his tail wrapped around her thigh.

"You should've left that thing to its fate," Arai muttered. He was unable to hide his dissatisfaction at Yae's promise to try to heal Hotaru.

"It might have been a little careless of me...", Yae answered while petting his golden head, and the tiger snorted. The quietness of night had sobered her somewhat from the exhilaration she felt earlier. There was nothing as hard as failure after getting people's hopes up.

"I guess you'll be able to stay here if you do manage to heal him, though. You could even return to Kaki Province," he added. There was nothing wrong about what he said, but the hand she was using to pet him froze. That was true. Many possibilities would open up for Yae if she successfully healed Hotaru.

"...Which province would be better for you two?" Yae asked. She actually wanted to ask which province she should choose so that they would stay with her forever, but she didn't have the courage.

"I would hate either one, obviously," he answered.

"...That figures." Miya Province was made up of the descendants of the people who sealed him, and the people of Kaki Province had maintained his seal. She was sure he detested them both just as fiercely. If Yae chose one of those provinces, she would eventually have to part ways with Arai and Sui.

"You didn't accept that request just because those pups begged you to. You just couldn't say no in front of that crowd. Are you that scared of disappointing other people?" Arai said with exasperation. His words pierced straight through her heart like an arrow. She wanted to deny what he was saying, to tell him it wasn't just fear, but she couldn't right away. "Those people couldn't care less about you. Why should you concern yourself with what they think?" He sounded like he truly didn't understand her.

That's easy to say for someone who has been showered with affection

for most of their life. A shadow fell over Yae's heart. She had lived to a decent age if she combined her last life and her current one, but there were still times when painful memories from her past surfaced in her mind.

She remembered the image of her college boyfriend, laughing more happily around another girl than he ever had around her. Did he ever smile that wide and with that much joy when they were alone together? And at work, she was always greeted after her coworkers. Whether it was a "good morning," an invitation to lunch, or a "nice job" after returning to the office, when people addressed her, it was always with a blank smile as if just remembering she was there.

These were all trivial things that it would have been weird to get worked up about. People were always unconsciously treating her as an afterthought, even if it was to a small degree. That they did it unconsciously was what made her so miserable. It might have been paranoia, but she couldn't escape the feeling. She still hadn't entirely escaped it. She felt like she had reached a place where she could begin to change, but she couldn't take that next step.

The desire to be loved should have been a beautiful thing, but Yae felt embarrassed by it.

"Putting on a good face for others like that won't help you in the slightest," Arai declared, having grown impatient waiting for Yae's response.

I was afraid of speaking too loudly and waking Sui, Yae thought, making up an obvious excuse. Yae couldn't stop herself from thinking about how cowardly she was, almost saying something like that with no genuine concern. "I know that," she said.

"No you don't," Arai retorted. He had watched over her in Kaki Province as Kuroashi. He might have a better understanding of Yae's personality than she did herself.

"...I'm going to sleep," Yae said.

"Hey, stop crying. What do you have to cry about?"

"I'm not crying." That was a lie. She could feel her eyelids growing moist. *I'm crying because you didn't say you'd stay with me even though you hate both places*. That thought, unfair as it was, crossed her mind. He had tried to kill Yae once, and he still hadn't apologized for that. He just stayed by her side as if nothing was wrong. He had also accepted her in large part because she had healed his brother. It was possible that he was only staying with her now as a preventative measure to keep the deformation from coming back. Just like that, Yae once again lost herself in thought.

"...Yae, do you have something you wanna say to me?" the golden tiger suddenly asked in a hard voice.

"No." She did, but she couldn't say that. Even now, Yae was an

afterthought to Arai. So how could she even think of sharing her messy, embarrassing desires with him? *Arai acts like he has no filter, but he's barely opened up to me at all.*

Yae grabbed his golden head in her arms and forced her eyelids shut. Arai snorted in resignation.



Unsurprisingly, Yae couldn't sleep because of Hotaru's crying. She looked closely at the tiger brothers, who were both sound asleep and lying defenseless on their backs, before she stealthily slipped out of the room. Large iron torches were lit throughout Miya Province at night, so there was no need for her to prepare a light source. She emerged onto the veranda and looked up at the moon, which resembled half of a broken plate. She then started slowly down the stairs built along the wall of the cliff.

I should've put on a coat... As a matter of fact, Yae was responsible for popularizing hooded ponchos in Kaki Province. It was currently the standard winter coat in the village. She had surprised people with her realistic drawings as well. *I wonder if the cable-knit poncho would catch on in Miya Province, too, if I chose to stay here.*

Yae continued her thoughts as she walked toward the river where Hotaru was. She had even popularized clothes hangers. The women of the village had been so thankful to her for the insect-repelling balm she had made. Everyone was always really happy when she made hair ornaments and other accessories. *I wonder if the only reason it felt like people were keeping their distance from me was because I didn't open up to them myself.* Now that Yae was looking back on her memories, she realized lots of people had reached out to her. Her intense desire to be liked had clouded her vision.

Yae stopped walking when she found herself in front of Hotaru, who was still crying mournfully. She didn't see any guards; maybe they were hidden. Tied down by the ropes, Hotaru lifted his swollen eyelids just a fraction. Tears fell from the eyeballs within, which had already turned to wood. Yae reached out a hand and brushed the edge of his mossy mouth.

"This must be so hard," she said, her words melting into the night. Unbeknownst to her, an earnestness had filled her voice. "...I want to heal you. Or rather, I want to clear away your anguish. I don't like seeing tears or having people look at me with sadness. I like smiles. But I keep getting these unpleasant thoughts. What if I only want to heal you because I'm afraid of disappointing everyone or because I

want everyone to like and praise me? That's a part of me, and I can't do anything about it. Do I have the right to save someone, feeling like that?"

Just as she finished baring her heart, Yae suddenly felt someone standing behind her. She turned around in surprise and immediately felt her head being cradled. A soft heavenly garment brushed her cheek. It was Arai.

"You're wrong, Yae. Those were my words. I guess I just assumed you were afraid of other people's disappointment. After all, I really don't think you have any obligation to heal someone from Miya Province. So I don't like the idea of you helping them, and I wish you would walk away. But I'm not denying your feelings. I want you to know that... You've always had the right to do this," he said.

"...Okay," Yae responded.

"I can't fully trust you, Yae... No, that's not right. Maybe I don't yet have the room in my heart yet to accept other people. Dammit, it's me that... None of this is your fault, Yae. I want you to know that, too."

Yae sniffled. She started to look up at Arai, but he pulled her face into his chest with strong arms. "Arai, are you comforting me?" she asked.

"...Is that a problem?" he replied awkwardly.

I see... Arai had uncertainty and pain in his heart, too. With a past like his, it was natural for him to have trouble trusting people. She would wait for the day he opened his heart to her. Trust would definitely form between them then. Yae needed to change, too, to ensure that day would come. As she was having these thoughts, she lightly gripped his sleeve.



A few days had passed since Yae began treating Hotaru. By now, nearly every person in Miya Province knew the story behind Yae's arrival, but no one looked down on her. People treated her politely, and it seemed their impression of her was less as a Natureless bride who had been abandoned and more as a doctor who cured deformation. Akanagi's attitude changed greatly, and he no longer spoke to her with abusive language. His foul mouth still occasionally emerged when he argued with Arai, however.

Yae was treating Hotaru basically the same way she'd treated Sui. She got Hotaru to lie down on his right side, tore open his abdomen, and set to work removing the corpse bugs in his bones and organs. It

felt like she was exploring a ghost ship in a horror movie. Multiple ladders had been placed against Hotaru's body, and she climbed them as she worked.

The majority of Hotaru's bones had already turned to wood. His ribs had become branches, and they were growing flowers and berries. Corpse bugs were tightly packed onto the branches as well and were especially numerous in the upper half of his body. The corpse bugs resembled cocoons as they had last time, but they were entirely opaque and gray. The cocoon strings were too hard for Yae to cut from the bone without using a knife.

Because of that and the dinosaur-like size of Hotaru's body, she wasn't making any progress with his treatment. Asking for help removing the bugs was not an option. Yae could only do this without being infected because she was Natureless, because she had served as a medium for many years, and because she instinctually denied the reality of deformation.

"I wonder if corpse bugs have gotten into his skull, too. It does seem like his brain has begun to degenerate..." Yae thought aloud.

"Hey, don't get cold feet now," Arai scolded as she moved behind Hotaru's thick left ribs using the elder's sternum as a platform and gazed into his dark, cavernous body. Arai was holding a small lamp for her. As it happened, this was a lamp Yae had made by melting and reshaping a fragment of glass she got when she expanded the entrance hole to her Whiskey House. It was one of the tools she had asked Arai to fetch for her the day after they arrived in Miya Province.

"You said you would heal him." Arai still hadn't agreed with Yae's decision to treat Hotaru, but he had mostly put his opinion aside to support her. "Trying to remove the little ones is probably pointless. They'll just reproduce and come right back. This monster won't be healed until you smoke out the boss."

It seemed the corpse bugs had a leader that was also the core of the illness, like a queen bee.

"I'm keeping an eye out as I remove the bugs, but I haven't been able to find it... Sui is looking at Hotaru's head right now," Yae explained.

"Well now, I was wondering where he'd been all day. So he was inside this guy's body the whole time..." Arai grimaced.

Yae sat down on the gently arcing breastbone. She put away the knife, lightly brushed her hands, and took a small pouch out of her waist bag. She plucked some dried fruits from inside and tossed them into Arai's mouth. He had sat down next to her and leaned in, mouth open expectantly, and he gladly received the treat. She ate one herself as well. Fatigue left her unable to think straight. She needed sugar.

"I doubt this guy can still feel pain properly, so it probably only

tickles him, but it's got to be a burden having people walk around inside his body," Arai said, making Yae feel bad about using Hotaru's ribs as a seat. She started to get up to descend to the ground, and Arai grabbed her arm. "No, it'll be fine as long as we don't move around too much. Going in and out will disturb him even more."

"Oh."

"So, Yae. Which place are you going to choose after you heal him?" Arai asked, catching Yae off guard and making her choke on her dried fruit. Despite having caused her choking in the first place, he clapped her on the back to help her through it.

"I—I haven't decided yet," she stammered.

"Hmm. That's fine, but I think you still have something to say to me," he pressed.

"I don't," she answered, holding her chest. He had been asking that same question at every opportunity since their chat in the middle of the night. It was bad for her heart.

Arai looked like he was about to say something else, but Yae tossed more dried fruit in his mouth. Creases formed on his brow as he gave up any further questions and focused on eating the dried fruit. Relieved, Yae heard a voice from the ground say, "Hey, how's it going?" She looked in the direction of the voice and saw Akanagi reach the top of the ladder.

"...You shouldn't come over here. You might get infected," Yae warned hesitantly. She had told the people of the village that they should do their best to stay away.

"My divine power gives me a resistance to illness and impurity," he answered. His divine power actually made it more dangerous for him to be here, but he wouldn't listen. He sat down on the nearest rib, facing them. "Will this really heal Elder Hotaru? ...Actually, I can see the number of corpse bugs has decreased. You're doing a good job. Though now that I look at him... Most of his organs have already dried and turned to wood." There was sadness in his eyes.

"Oh, you're right. This is pointless. We should quit now," Arai answered coldly in Yae's place. She grabbed a fistful of dried fruits and stuffed them into Arai's mouth to teach him a lesson. She saw no regret on his face as he savored the taste. Akanagi gave him a light glare and quickly returned his eyes to Yae.

"...I know we've given you a difficult job. To be honest, I think you've done more than enough just by calming Elder Hotaru," he said.

"I bet. The last thing you all want is for him to go berserk and escape the village," Arai piped up again. Yae stuffed another fistful of dried fruits into his mouth to shut him up... Hold on, was this what he was after?

"Exactly," Akanagi responded, agreeing without a fight this time.

"It would big a big help if he stayed calm."

"That's right. Death would be a favorable outcome as well." This time, the response was not from Arai. It hadn't come from Yae, either. Yae looked down and saw Hoodori, who was climbing up one of the ladders and carrying a small old man on his shoulders who looked to be two hundred years old. It was the old man who had spoken. He was wearing a hat with earmuffs and a thick cotton robe despite the summer heat.

"Recovery would be best, of course. But death works, too. If he dies, we will no longer have to worry about him growing violent," the old man said with a dry, unfeeling voice. Hoodori glanced at Yae and the others, grabbed a thick vine entwined around a bone, and nimbly moved next to Akanagi. He set the old man down beside them.

"I am Tamao, Miya Province's previous chief. They call me one of the elders now, but I'm really just a retired old geezer." He spoke candidly about himself, but Yae didn't sense any bitterness, and he wasn't unpleasant to listen to. Tamao understood well that his advanced age allowed him some cruelty and self-deprecation. "Your name is Yae, correct? My, my... You truly don't have any scent."

"I'm Natureless," Yae responded. Tamao didn't hesitate to bring up the topic that everyone had been politely avoiding since she arrived in Miya Province.

"She doesn't stink, so what should it matter? Not that some weak geezer like you would understand," Arai snapped.

Yae was unsure if she should be pleased by his objection or not. *I think he was defending me, but I wish he would stop calling everyone other than himself a weakling.* She felt Hoodori and Akanagi giving her nervous glances and forced a smile.

Tamao nodded in agreement without a hint of anger at Arai's words. He was either very tolerant or totally unaffected by criticism from others. "Hmm, it's disappointing, though. I thought if you possessed a Gentle Nature like the other women, you would be suitable for the chief's second wife."

"Huh?!" Arai and Akanagi exclaimed simultaneously.

"Watch yourself, pip-squeak. Hey, Yae, can I chuck this geezer halfway across the village?" Arai asked menacingly.

"Elder Tamao, don't joke like that. The women from Kaki Province were sent here on Miya Province's request. She may be Natureless, but we can't ask her to be a second wife. Even if she'd be married to the chief, number two is still number two," Akanagi protested.

Tamao ignored their angry looks and inclined his head. In addition to his hat, he was wearing a veil that extended down to his nose, so Yae couldn't really tell what he looked like. She could, however, see the long white beard covering his chin. Tamao stroked it

with a thin, twiglike hand.

"I'm surprised Kaki Province was willing to give you up. You may not have divine power, but your soul is shockingly smooth. And on top of that, you have something very frightening protecting you, binding you hand and foot." His head moved slightly in Arai's direction, but then his gaze seemed to return to Yae. "So who will it be? Akanagi or Hoodori?"

Yae was pretty sure she knew what he meant, but she wasn't able to answer right away. That was a difficult question.

"Hoodori doesn't have divine power. His abilities as an elebeast are also nothing remarkable. He has wings, but he can't use them to fly," Tamao said. Out of the corner of her eye, Yae saw Hoodori look down, and she was filled with anxiety. She wished Tamao wouldn't say things like that with Hoodori sitting right there, but the old man didn't seem to care. "But his intuition is so good it may as well be considered foresight. He has good long-distance vision as well, and even the most talented elebeasts can't match him. It was thanks to him that we were able to locate you. His skill as a warrior is apparent. We would not have allowed a weak man to claim a bride from outside."

His mouth, visible beneath the hem of the veil, twisted into a smile.

"As for Akanagi, well, just look at him. Handsome, isn't he? And he possesses divine power despite his Wild Nature. He could have become a chief someday were he not born too soon. The current chief is still young, and his younger brother is a remarkable man as well. Unless some unforeseen disaster occurs, it is unlikely Akanagi will ever be chief."

"How many times do I have to say it? I don't have any interest in that," Akanagi responded angrily, but Tamao paid him no mind. He spoke only to Yae.

"Either one would make for a satisfactory husband."

"...But I'm Natureless. It would be painful for both of us," Yae said as an excuse to refuse them both. She normally hated that she was born Natureless, but she still used it as an escape whenever convenient. She felt like mocking herself for that, but she maintained a blank face.

I doubt it's actually me he wants. He's probably just interested in Arai and Sui. Even Yae, Natureless as she was, could tell that the brothers' divine power was different in quality and scale. It might well have been fear of Arai's great divinity that caused the people of Miya Province from a century ago to try to install him as their chief and then to seal him when he refused. They wouldn't have done that simply because someone possessed exceptional divine power. In other

words, the ones who sealed Arai must have sensed what he was, even if only vaguely.

Regardless of all that, even now, Yae's feelings and wishes were once again being treated as an afterthought. She was always going to be inconsequential in the eyes of others. *I'm letting it get to me again. Is there nothing I can do to stop hurting?* No, that wasn't right. There was no point to any of this if she couldn't start being honest with others and let them know when she was hurt.

"Yae," Arai said suddenly as she hung her head in thought. "Do you have something you wanna say to me?"

"Huh? No, I don't," Yae responded, flustered. The timing of the question had caught her off guard. *I wouldn't have guessed, but maybe he's the type to overthink things, too.* He had the opposite problem she had—too much attention from others had cast a shadow over his life.

Yae observed him as he made a sullen expression. Akanagi was certainly good-looking as Tamao had just boasted, but to her, no one was more gorgeous than Arai. His bright sunflower-colored eyes drew people in like a magnet. They had come a long way from Kuroashi's muddled gaze.

A short silence fell, and the white tiger, who had until now been searching for the corpse bugs' leader, emerged to jump nimbly from bone to bone and sit down next to Yae. She patted him on the head with an expression of sympathy. "What were you talking about?" he asked, the circles of his ring crest turning in his eyes. Tamao had probably noticed their unusual crests.

"This old man was talking about marrying Yae to one of these weaklings, so I was thinking about how best to dispose of them," Arai responded, dropping a bomb of a statement. The white tiger's eyes went wide.

"Why would we give Yae to them at this point? These people are shameless," Sui said in his usual kind voice, and Yae felt her face stiffen. At the same time, both embarrassment and a slight sense of hope filled her. It sounded like Sui wanted her by his side. "Anyway, Yae. I don't really like this place. Let's get out of here."

Sui tended to operate on his own schedule even more than Arai did.

"Why?" Yae asked.

"Because the corpse bugs in this monster don't have a leader. That means his deformation was caused by a curse."

"Huh?! A curse?" she exclaimed, surprised.

Sui bobbed his whiskers in affirmation and looked at Tamao with unreadable eyes. "You've known all along who cursed him, haven't you?"

"Hey, what do you mean by 'curse'?" Akanagi demanded, also

surprised. Hoodori looked at Yae and the others in bewilderment.

"Hmm. That's a troubling accusation," Tamao said with a sigh. "I'm sure this is true of Kaki Province as well, but no one would dare curse someone of their own province. If they did, they would certainly suffer banishment."

"I don't care why this monster was cursed. What I don't like is that you hid the truth from Yae even though she agreed to treat him," Sui responded, and he tugged on Yae's sleeve with his mouth as if to say they should leave. He almost pulled hard enough to make her fall from the rib. She patted his chin to tell him to wait.

"...I agree. That kid already said that Yae has done more than enough. She has no obligation to continue helping. Also, Yae will not marry any of you. I won't stand for it," Arai declared, dropping his second bomb, before lifting up a surprised Yae and putting her on the white tiger's back. Sui ignored Yae's protests as he kicked lightly off the rib and landed on the ground. Arai remained in human form and leaped from bone to bone to join them. He always moved as if almost floating, possibly due to the heavenly raiment around his shoulders.

They were headed for the house they had been borrowing during their stay in Miya Province when Arai gave Yae a warning. "If you stay here much longer, they'll force you to marry. You need to make up your mind sooner rather than later."

"...Okay," she responded quietly, and the white tiger's fur bristled.

"What? Are those men your type, Yae? Are you thinking of marrying one of them? Why?" he asked. Yae wasn't sure how to answer a direct question like *Why*?

"It's not that I particularly like them, it's just... It would be sort of a political marriage, I guess..."

"You would choose one of them even though you have me and Arai?"

"I-it's not like that at all! It's about obligation."

"Obligation? I don't know what you mean, but is that obligation more important than us?"

Yae was at a loss for words.

"That's good, Sui. Let her hear it," Arai cheered Sui on without any sense of responsibility. Yae glared at him. "Yae, I know you have something to say. Keep it down too long and you'll choke."

"I don't." Yae sighed and decided to ask the white tiger about what he had said earlier. "So, Sui. Did Hotaru really get deformation because of a curse?"

"Yep," he answered disinterestedly. "I have a good nose for curses. Those corpse bugs have a rotten stench that's different from normal deformation. I scratched open one of his bones to check, and it was packed with ants and mud."

“Why were you scratching open his...? Wait, ants?”

“Ants are insects that consume righteousness. Hotaru or someone close to him might have done something immoral at some point. I think he was cursed as a result. That’s why I have a bad feeling about this place,” Sui finished with a slight emphasis to his tone.

VII A Fairy Tale of Longing and Blooming

That night, a luxurious meal was carried to Yae's room as if the villagers mistakenly believed she planned to leave at once. And after her bath, a group of children approached her to offer candies made from honey. Yae knew they were trying to keep her there until Hotaru was completely cured, and it made her feel awkward. She decided to go to bed earlier than usual.

She was never able to relax on the fluffy Miya Province bed, probably because she was used to sleeping on hammocks. Her sleep was shallow once again, and she woke suddenly in the middle of the night. Feeling something was wrong, she pushed down the covers and sat up to find Arai's black sword lying next to her. It looked just like his brother's sword, except that Arai's bore a gold teardrop pattern, and Sui's had a black teardrop pattern. When in the world had it gotten under her covers?

"Isn't this thing being a little too independent...?" Maybe it had decided to go on a nighttime walk, rattled into her room, and slipped under her covers. *Wow, that's a terrifying thought.* No, maybe Arai had simply sneaked into her room and hid it in her futon. But why would he do that? This second option was just as terrifying.

Thinking she may as well take it back to Arai's room, Yae adjusted her collar and sash, grabbed the sword, and stood up. She expected Arai and Sui would be sleeping in the next room. They had been given separate houses because of their genders, but the brothers had been ignoring that and sleeping near her. Nothing was going to happen between them, so she didn't mind. *I am Natureless, after all.*

Yae held the black sword as she emerged into the hallway, which was also the veranda. She paused and leaned over the railing to look toward the river. It didn't seem like Hotaru was struggling or crying. There were supposed to be bonfires burning down there, but... What was that?

"Torches?" Yae blinked. She gazed down and noticed there were

torches set not just by the river but also along the stairs against the cliff face. Or was it a line of people holding torches and coming up the stairs? The house Yae was staying in was built on the top part of the cliff. Maybe the torch bearers were returning from a scouting trip to the river. That was what she thought at first, but something seemed weird about them... She could hear voices coming from the procession.

“Hello? Are you there?”

“Is that you? Are you there?”

It sounded like they were calling out to someone. Yae clung to the railing and strained her eyes.

“Are you there? Are you there?”

“Is that you? Are you whole?”

“Let us break, break your neck.”

Yae gulped. The torches were being held by *shirabyoushi*—female dancers from the Heian period in Japan—wearing red hakama. The arms holding the torches, however, were soot-stained branches. The dancers were all wooden dolls with circular holes where their eyes, mouths, and noses should have been.

They're not human. They're not shades, either! Yae shuddered, and the black sword rattled in her hands. She was so surprised that she almost dropped the sword, but she sensed that it was warning her to run, so she turned around and hurried back inside.

She burst into Arai and Sui's room. There were two beds in the middle of the floor, with a human-shaped lump inside each; they were probably sleeping. Yae's lamp had been set between the beds for some reason, and a red flame flickered within it.

“Wake up, you two! Something weird is happening—”

She pulled down their blankets without waiting for a reply and froze. There had definitely been a human shape under each of the blankets, but there was no one there. Instead, there was a pouch full of dried fruit in the middle of one of the beds. She picked it up and stared at it silently. She could hear footsteps approaching and voices saying, “Are you there?” and “Shall we break you?” The wooden dancers were in the hallway.

Yae jerked her head up. She had left the bedroom door wide open. She crawled toward the door to close it, the black sword in her right hand and the pouch in her left, but that was a mistake. A wooden dancer was already standing right outside the room. “Are you there?” the dancer asked.

Yae scattered the contents of the pouch before her and sat down holding the black sword aloft with both hands. She kept her head down, refusing to raise it. “I'm not here. There is no one to break,” she answered. After a short silence, the dancer picked up one of the dried

fruits at its feet and left. But there was no time for relief. The next dancer stopped before the door just like the last one.

"Are you there?" it asked.

"I'm not here," Yae answered.

She repeated the same exchange over and over again as each dancer approached. Strangely, the dried fruits scattered in front of her always returned to their original number no matter how many were taken. Eventually, however, the dancers stopped leaving right away and began to persistently ask, "Shall we break you?"

By now, Yae had come to realize that the dimension she was occupying had been slightly shifted—that she was on the grounds of some ceremony. She also realized the dried fruit offerings were beginning to lose their effect. *They're going to overwhelm me.* Did she have some kind of charm that could drive them away? Her panic grew, leaving her unable to think straight.

"Shall we break you?"

"There's no one to break."

"Let us bend you, let us break you. Let us snap that adorable neck."

Along with the voices came an object rolling down the hall. It was the wooden head of one of the dancers. Yae, her head still down, met its gaze. She stared into the pair of deep black holes.

Oh no. Yae realized the danger she was now in. She immediately drew the sword from the scabbard, and with a once-in-a-lifetime reflexive reaction, she swung the sword down and cut off the arm of a dancer that had been reaching toward her. Unfortunately, the miracle ended there. She looked down at the dancer's fallen arm and lost the will to fight. The arm was a branch, sooty to the core.

"Let us break you, let us break you."

The dancers streamed into the room one after another. Trying to respond to them all would be pointless. There was no end to them, and they were clearly after her.

I've been cursed. Somebody had cursed her, but she didn't know who it was. She might have been able to perform ceremony rites, but there was no way she could remove a curse from *herself*.

"Ah... I don't want to die," Yae muttered unconsciously. That's right; no matter how hard things had gotten, she had never wanted to die. She wanted to live. *Even back then, I struggled to survive.* No matter how neglected she felt, no matter how much of an afterthought she was, she never wanted to give up on life. After all, if she didn't continue to live, she would never know love or affection.

I wanted to be loved by someone. I wanted to love them back. I wanted to support them, bring them joy, and make them smile. She didn't have any special reasons or tragic circumstances. It had all started with a

very commonplace desire to make the people around her smile. She felt happy when someone smiled at her or talked to her. That was all. But as she grew into adulthood, her desires grew into cowardice and greed. She became so starved for kindness that she wanted to shovel it down her throat with both hands.

As Yae watched the approaching wooden dancers, Arai's voice suddenly reverberated in her head. *Do you have something you want to say to me?*

"I want to live... I really want to live. But I hate being alone. I want someone by my side. Someone I like. I... Arai, I haven't forgiven you for trying to kill me. Why haven't you apologized? That's so cruel. Hey, answer me. I-it made me feel miserable! Oh, I don't care anymore. Just come here!"

Yae was venting her feelings straight from the heart, just like she had when she released Arai from the stone monument. When she was done, she laid a kiss on the blade of the sword, and then she heard a *crack*. It had come from the ceiling. "Huh?" she said, looking up as the ceiling fissured and broke. She watched, dumbstruck, as Arai landed nimbly in front of her with his heavenly garment around his shoulders.

"Will you stop yelling?" he said, looking down at her pompously. He began to scold her. "Took you long enough to call me. You had my sword, so you could've called me ages ago." He ripped the black sword from Yae's hands as she stood, expression blank, covered in wood chips from the broken ceiling. He then began to repel the wooden dancers by kicking them mercilessly with his feet and carving them up with his blade.

Really? He's just going to brute force his way through this?! Yae had half expected the black sword to transform into Arai so he could gallantly whisk her away, like a scene out of some fairy tale. But that was just a naive fantasy. In reality, he crashed through the ceiling and began to smash everything to pieces with muscle. There was nothing romantic about it.

"Ha, I don't know if this place is the result of a curse or what, but it doesn't matter as long as I tear the whole thing down!" he yelled.

He's such a meathead, Yae thought to herself.

After he had eliminated most of the dancers, Arai put on a show proving just how much of a meathead he was. He sliced through the sliding door with his sword and then cut down the thick pillars supporting the roof with one more wide swing. Yae trembled. Where did he get that strength from?

The house groaned as it began to collapse. Mission accomplished, Arai returned to a dumbfounded Yae, sheathed his sword, and effortlessly picked her up.

“Let’s go. Three, two, one.”

“W-wait...!” That was all Yae could manage before Arai stepped onto the railing of the crumbling veranda with her on his shoulders and leaped to the ground. Yae screamed. The house was built near the top of the cliff, meaning it was dozens of meters above the ground. It was like they were jumping from an apartment over ten stories high.

“Close your eyes if you have to!” Arai barked.

Trembling with fear at the feeling of air rushing past her, Yae responded on reflex. “I won’t!”



Yae and Arai were not alone in their descent from the cliff. The wooden dancers fell from the crumbling house as well, each one morphing into a pitch-black tree as it collided with the ground.

At a loss for words, Yae watched as the strange phenomena continued without end. The trees grew rapidly, shooting out countless branches that themselves sprouted black leaves and flowers. Finally, the trees began to sprout black deer skeletons. *What are these trees, some kind of barometz plant? I don’t want any part of this...!* The barometz was a legendary plant that grew sheep as its fruit.

And it didn’t end there—purplish-black snow had begun to fall. Arai looked puzzled and set Yae down. There was an unpleasant *splooosh* when her feet hit the ground, and she realized she wasn’t wearing shoes. She glanced toward her feet and saw that the earth had been covered in a viscous substance that resembled black oil.

Yae clung to Arai with all her might. He turned from his observation of the barometz plants to look at her and wrap an arm around her waist. “Hey, Yae... I think you still have something you want to say to me.”

He’s bringing that up now?! Yae was astonished, but when she looked up, his expression was entirely serious. She then had a sudden realization. *Maybe he’s the one who has something to say to me.* That felt right to her. Watching from the corner of her eye as the black deer skeletons continued to grow, she opened her mouth and posed a question.

“Do you have something you want to say to me? Tell me.”

Arai touched Yae’s cheek, and all her attention shifted to him.

“I do,” he answered with a difficult smile. He looked like he had been waiting some time for her to ask that question. “I detest people. Those bastards who sealed me...and you for trying to make me submit.”

“...Yeah, I know.”

“That’s why I won’t say it yet,” he muttered quietly.

He couldn’t apologize for killing Yae because of his persistent hatred of people and inability to trust them completely. Yae wondered if that was what he had meant. Unsurprisingly, he wasn’t ready to share the reason he’d tried to kill her, either. But she felt worlds better. He had shared with her that there was indeed something he was not yet ready to say to her. She had wanted to know his feelings more than she had ever wanted the truth.

“I don’t have anything against you, really,” Arai said.

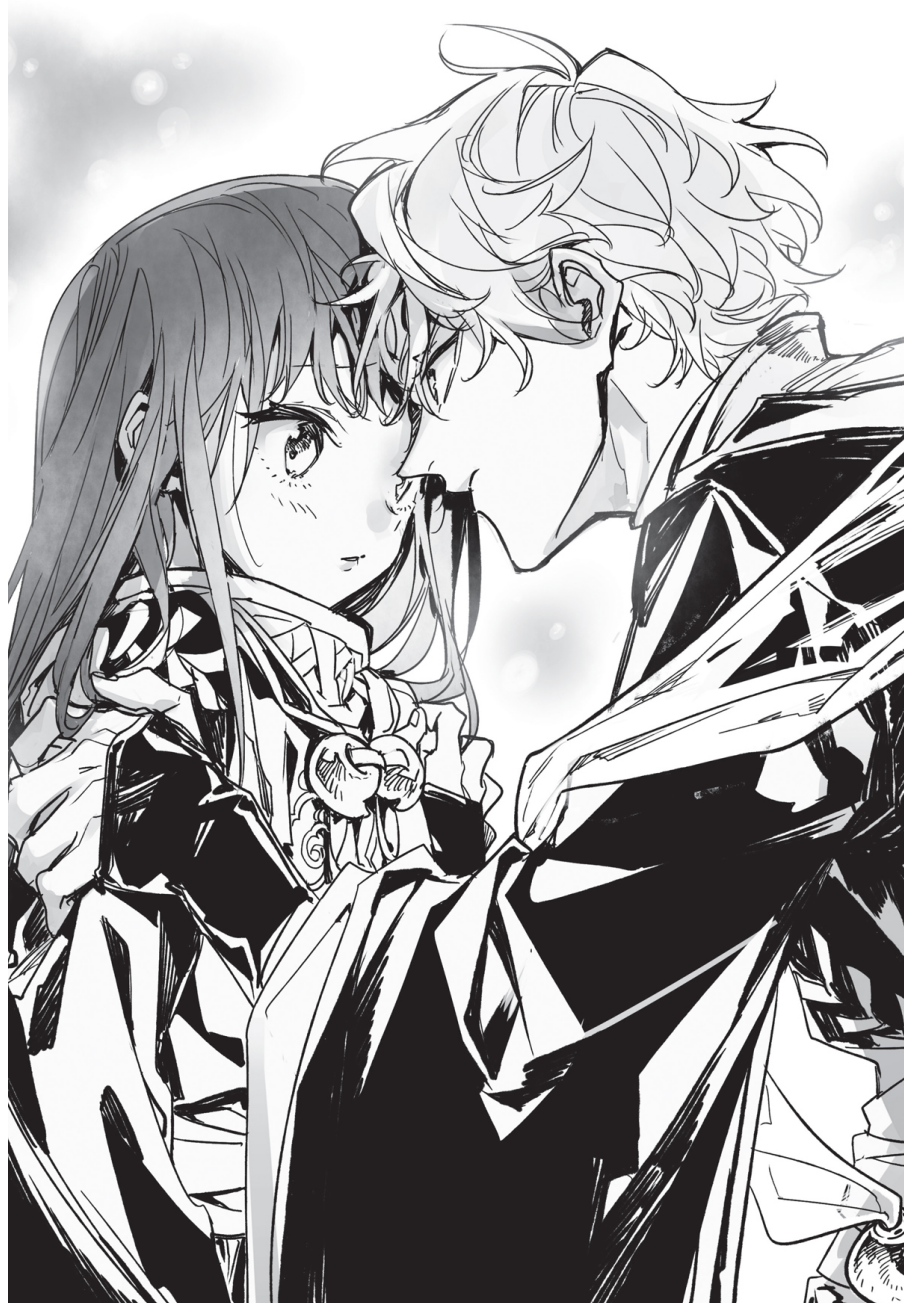
“Yeah... Okay,” Yae responded.

“My fate has been tied to yours. I won’t try to hurt you again... So don’t look so lonely. I was originally a god of high divinity. I was probably kind to people. Keep that in mind.”

Isn’t “kind” a word other people are supposed to use to describe you? Well, he probably felt guilty about trying to kill me all along, in his own way. Still scowling, Arai put his forehead to Yae’s. The sudden headbutt surprised her, and it hurt a little. He then started to rub his forehead against hers like a tiger cub. His bangs were itchy, and his breath was warm on her face.

Is he marking me? Yae thought with embarrassment just before she heard the *plop* of a heavy object falling into the black sludge. She returned to her senses and backed away from Arai slightly. The fully ripened—if that was the correct word to use—black deer skeletons fell from the branches one after another, shook their heads, and looked toward Yae and Arai. Then they bowed their heads, formed a herd, and charged.

“Exterminating monsters is my specialty. This must have been my purpose once. Get behind me!” Arai shouted. He drew the black sword from its scabbard and dashed forward, the cloth around his shoulders fluttering behind him as he slayed the black deer skeletons. He smashed each one apart with a single blow, but there were so many, and more continued to be born from the branches.



Yae grew worried that Arai wouldn't be able to take them all out by himself. Just as she had that thought, an especially large black deer skeleton ripened and fell to the ground. It cried, "Broken." As if resonating, the other skeletons also began to cry out variations of "broke," "broken," and "Why is it broken?"

"Oh, I see... This thing is just like me," Arai muttered, suddenly lowering his sword.

"Huh...?" Yae responded.

"Or it's how I could have been. If you hadn't purified me, I might eventually have become like this," he explained, his voice dry. He turned to face a bewildered Yae. "This thing is the same kind of being as me and Sui. I can feel it. It has a trace of divinity. Something corrupted it. No, I know what happened—the people of this land did something to it. Its resentment is what caused the outbreak of deformation."

Yae quickly thought about what he had just said. *I've never seen shirabyoushi in this world before. Were the dancers dressed like that because this being drifted here from Japan like Arai and Sui? Maybe it's similar to Lady Bihin. Then the people of Miya Province harmed it, which resulted in the elders being punished and inflicted with deformation... But none of that matters right now! I need to do something!*

Yae looked at the black deer skeletons as they cried, "Broke, broken, why is it broken?" and dropped down to kneel where she was.

"Honored spirit, I will heal you!" she yelled. "I am a skilled healer! I am a doctor of the supernatural! I healed Sui, so I have proven results!" The large deer responded immediately with a violent cry. It jumped high over Arai's head and charged straight at Yae.

"Run!" Arai shouted, but she couldn't. Her body wouldn't move. Right as she despaired that she was going to die, a white tiger leaped from behind her and hacked apart the black deer skeleton with the white sword gripped in his mouth. The bones were sent flying.

The white tiger wasn't the only one who rushed there to save her. She heard a *whoosh* as an arrow flew past. She darted her eyes about and found Akanagi and Hoodori on the crumbled cliff, both holding bows. She wondered if they had been dragged into the shifted dimension as well or if they had forced their way in like Arai.

Dazed, Yae glanced around herself and suddenly realized there was something in her lap. She thought at first that it was one of the deer skeleton's bones, but it wasn't. It was a wooden comb, broken in half and blackened by soot. It had a daffodil pattern carved into it, and it looked quite old.

"I'll heal you... I'll fix you." She stroked the pattern with her fingers, and the falling black snow stopped in midair as if time had frozen. It then slowly returned to the sky.

Transparent light-purple buds began to grow from the ground around Yae. They bloomed into flowers before her eyes. There were morning glories, pansies, hydrangeas, irises, columbines, and balloon flowers. The purple flowers swallowed the ground like waves.

The black trees also turned to a light purple, and white vines and ivy wrapped around them. The vines also crawled up the cliff and grew small purple berries that looked fresh and juicy. The black deer skeletons, which had stopped moving at some point, were covered in flowers, too.

The flowers budded and bloomed in rapid succession, all without a sound. A sweet scent permeated the area. A springtime wind passed through, and the flowers were illuminated by dappled light as if filtered through the branches of invisible trees. The petals sparkled with morning dew. Two small birds with wings blue like jewels flew by Yae's side in perfect harmony. She looked up and saw that the sky was a bright shade of pink.

Before long, everything went dark as if someone had snuffed out a candle, and the land returned to normal. There was nothing unusual about the cliff, the houses, or anything else. Iron torches lit the quiet night.

Akanagi seemed lost in a daze, until he suddenly yelled, "Elder Hotaru!" and raced down the stairs of the cliff. Yae turned around and saw a gentle-faced man walking toward them from the river with the support of some guards. He was a slim man with wolf ears on his head. His gray hair was cut neat and short.

Yae's and the man's eyes met. She was still sitting on the ground, and he crouched down in front of her. "Thank you," he said with a smile. Yae's eyes went wide, and Arai ruffled her hair from behind. The white tiger jumped up to put his paws on her shoulders.

The villagers began to rush from their doors, having noticed the change. The houses lit up one after another. Conscious of the broken wooden comb in her hands, she watched the man—Hotaru—as he was buried by an onslaught of elebeast pups.

"It's over, Yae. Let's go back to Shishina," the white tiger pestered, casual as ever.

Yae blinked, then smiled and said, "Okay."



It was the third day after they had returned to Shishina. They had used the excitement after Hotaru's recovery to slip away mostly unnoticed.

“In short, it was my family’s mistake,” Hotaru said. He looked about fifty years old, but he was apparently much older. “I’m sure the other provinces are in much the same situation, but our contact with the outside world has been severed as a result of overpopulation of a single Nature. That might be a good thing in the sense that there is no conflict, but it has also resulted in stagnation. A narrowed worldview creates narrow-minded people... Yes, a member of my family struck upon a terrible idea. He thought he would try to steal the power of a being that has been long sealed by one of our ceremonies.”

“Is that being the owner of this wooden comb?” Yae asked, holding out the broken item. Hotaru nodded.

“I don’t know who or what that owner was, though,” he said.

“If the divine treasure is a comb, maybe they’re a god related to combs?” Could they be a member of Arai’s family...? No, it would be better not to think about that.

“The issue is not the nature of the comb’s owner, but rather that whatever it was, it was too much to handle, and that is why it was sealed. My family member failed to understand that. After releasing the seal, he realized it was something he should not have done. The divine treasure was defiled and cursed, and it caused an increase in deformation. Fearing my reprimand, he consulted with the other elders. It was then decided that the young man responsible for this would be married off to another province.”

“Was that to keep him away from the wrath of the being he had unleashed? That would be like taking out two birds with one stone since they would also be bringing in women of a different Nature.”

“That’s right. However, the impurity continued to spread even after the young man left the province.”

That might have been the reason Yae and the marriage procession were attacked by shades when traveling to Miya Province. *That impurity also gave strength to Lady Bihin... I wonder if that’s what enabled her to control the shades and steal the black sword from the Whiskey House.* She now knew why Arai had found the increase in shades so strange. To think there was such a dark secret behind the marriage discussions...

“As a relative of the young man who defiled the divine treasure, the curse moved to me. You know the rest of the story. But then, you all grew suspicious that my deformation was abnormal, caused by a curse. Some grew fearful that if Kaki Province learned of our province’s failure, they would demand to have their women back. Panicking, they broke the divine treasure and tried to pass the curse to you,” Hotaru explained.

“So after I turned down the offer of a good husband, they figured I wouldn’t be staying in Miya Province anyway and decided to shove

the curse onto me...?" Yae asked.

"...Yes, Elder Tamao got carried away. He had innocent children give you candies mixed with hallucinogenic powder to put you in a vulnerable state, then attempted to move the curse to you..."

Yae forced a smile. *Thank you, black sword, for rattling into my bed! I asked Arai about it afterward, and it sounds like it really did that all on its own.* She swore in her heart that she would give the sword all the affection it deserved from now on.

"Anyway, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for what you did after we dragged you into our province's mess. I don't mean to suggest this makes up for everything, but I have brought you gifts in apology. Please accept them," Hotaru said. There was a wagon behind him packed with wicker cases.

Yae was unsure of how to respond. What she truly wanted to say was that she didn't need their thanks and no longer wanted anything to do with them. It was to communicate that very notion that she and the brothers had left Miya Province and returned to Shishina without saying good-bye to anyone. She had been polishing the comb every day and was making progress removing the black stains. Once it was clean, she was planning on asking Sui to help her repair it. He was skilled with that kind of thing.

Despite her wish to be left alone, however, Hotaru had arrived that afternoon with a horse-drawn wagon. He had come alone.

"We are sending a replacement for the young man sent to marry in Kaki Province... The chief there agreed to conceal the reason for this disaster. Fortunately, there was no real damage over there. If the truth came to light, Gentle Natures would grow even more uneasy around Wild Natures. He said he wanted to avoid that."

"He would say that. Sounds good to me."

"You're okay with that, too, Dr. Yae?" It was embarrassing having an older person, and an elder no less, call her "doctor." "Then if you can find it in yourself to forgive us, how about moving to Miya Province for real this time?"

"Uh, I don't..." She was about to say *I don't think so* but was interrupted when the tiger brothers, who had been sitting calmly at her feet this whole time, bristled their tails and roared. Yae and Hotaru were sitting on a bench outside the Can House. The interior of the house was unfinished and not ready for visitors.

"The chief of Kaki Province was very worried about you, Dr. Yae," Hotaru informed her.

"I'm grateful for that, but..." Yae smiled. She was now able to accept those words wholeheartedly. "I'm going to live here. I want to live freely from now on."

"Freely?" Hotaru repeated, inclining his head.

“I never really felt like I belonged in Kaki Province, either—though I now realize that was largely due to my own self-doubt... Anyway, I’ve been through a lot, and I feel like even if I return home, or move to Miya Province, I’ll always be treated like an outsider... I don’t want to live in either one!” Yae exclaimed, feeling liberated as she expressed her true feelings.

She didn’t need to be liked by everyone. She wanted to try prioritizing her own feelings, even if she disappointed people or made them dislike her in the process. That was her current state of mind. She still had some weakness left, but she believed she had made a little progress.

I found something I want to do, too. It made her happy to have people tell her thank you. Those words led to the smiles she had always wished to see. *I should give this doctor thing a shot.* The thought filled her heart with energy.

“I finally realized that if you don’t have a place to belong, you can make one for yourself. So I’m staying right here,” Yae declared. She was convinced that would be the end of their discussion, but Hotaru showed no sign of leaving.

“Really? That’s too bad,” he replied with a face that didn’t show much genuine disappointment. He picked up a package he had set aside and brought it to his lap. It contained what looked like an old notebook. The cover had a pattern of red and black plum blossoms.

“...Is that a seal book?” Yae muttered to herself, and Hotaru smiled cheerfully. The smile would have captivated her if she had been into older men, but instead she felt a chill.

“I’m impressed. Yes, this is apparently something called a seal book. It has been passed down in my family for generations.”

“...Huh,” she responded warily. Arai and Sui reacted with significantly more interest, and they suddenly resumed their human forms to peer at the book.

“What’s this...? Doesn’t it look familiar?” Arai asked.

“It does, Brother,” Sui responded.

It should, Yae thought. A seal book was a book used by visitors of temples and shrines in Japan to collect seal stamps. If they were truly well-known gods, then people very likely visited their shrine to receive a stamp with their name.

“The ink has blurred too much to read it, though,” Arai said.

“Or rather, the words are losing their shape as the book loses its meaning,” Sui added.

Hotaru smiled at the brothers’ analysis. Yae had an increasingly bad feeling about this.

“A story has been passed down from my ancestors... A group of people once calmed unruly beings from another land by using this

notebook to write down the names and locations of gods. It is said that those people were the ancestors of each country's Great Protector," said Hotaru.

"Really?"

"And?"

Curiosity seeped from Arai and Sui as they urged him to continue. Yae tried to sneak away, but the brothers grabbed her shoulders from either side.

"Unfortunately, there is no longer anyone left who can read these characters, and the book has lost its meaning. The mysteriums have increased in size over time, and even the sealed, unruly beings have transformed," Hotaru explained, his face serious. "Ceremonies remain in each land, but the number of people performing them has decreased. It is said that impurities and fallen gods have come to roam the world in great numbers. I think this may be the cause of the increase in deformation in recent years."

"I'm sorry, but what does any of that have to do with me?" Yae asked stiffly, worried about where this was going.

"Someone needs to use this notebook to find the transformed beings, pacify them, and rewrite their names. That will do the land a great service. Unlike other shades and fallen gods, their power is too great. They cannot be left unchecked," Hotaru answered her.

"...Wow. Sure sounds difficult."

"I had planned to find and seal them myself, but this recent deformation has left me weak..."

"You look totally fine to me."

Hotaru smiled and pressed the notebook into Yae's hands. She tried to push it back, but he forced her fingers around it.

"I'm not asking you to do it for free. I will give you all the support I can. If you need extra men, I have a few young candidates I can send your way," Hotaru offered. Yae had a feeling she knew who he would send.

"I'm good." She rejected the offer. She was now able to tell people openly when she didn't want something. But Hotaru didn't falter.

"I am not trying to force a burden onto you. Honestly, this isn't really about you, Dr. Yae. I just thought it would be best to entrust this to those two."

"Arai and Sui?"

"They are not ordinary elebeasts, are they?"

Yae was startled by the question, and Arai stole the seal book from her hands. "...My family might be in here," he said.

"Our family?" Sui asked.

Yae wanted to groan. This was getting bad. She wouldn't be able to ignore it if there was a chance that Arai and Sui's family members

were suffering. She had forgotten that Hotaru had divine power. He must have noticed that the brothers' powers were unusual. If she accepted the notebook, however, she couldn't help but feel she was going to have to kiss her quiet life in Shishina good-bye.

"Yae, you don't have to take it if you don't want to. You come first in our hearts," Sui assured her with a pained smile, and she felt the stubbornness in her heart begin to sway. She was way too much of a pushover...

"But Yae won't be able to refuse. I know her personality too well," Arai said with a smile, peering into her face. "Yae, can you do me a favor?" Her swaying heart filled with heat. "If you do, I might come to like humans..."

"Like I'd believe that!"

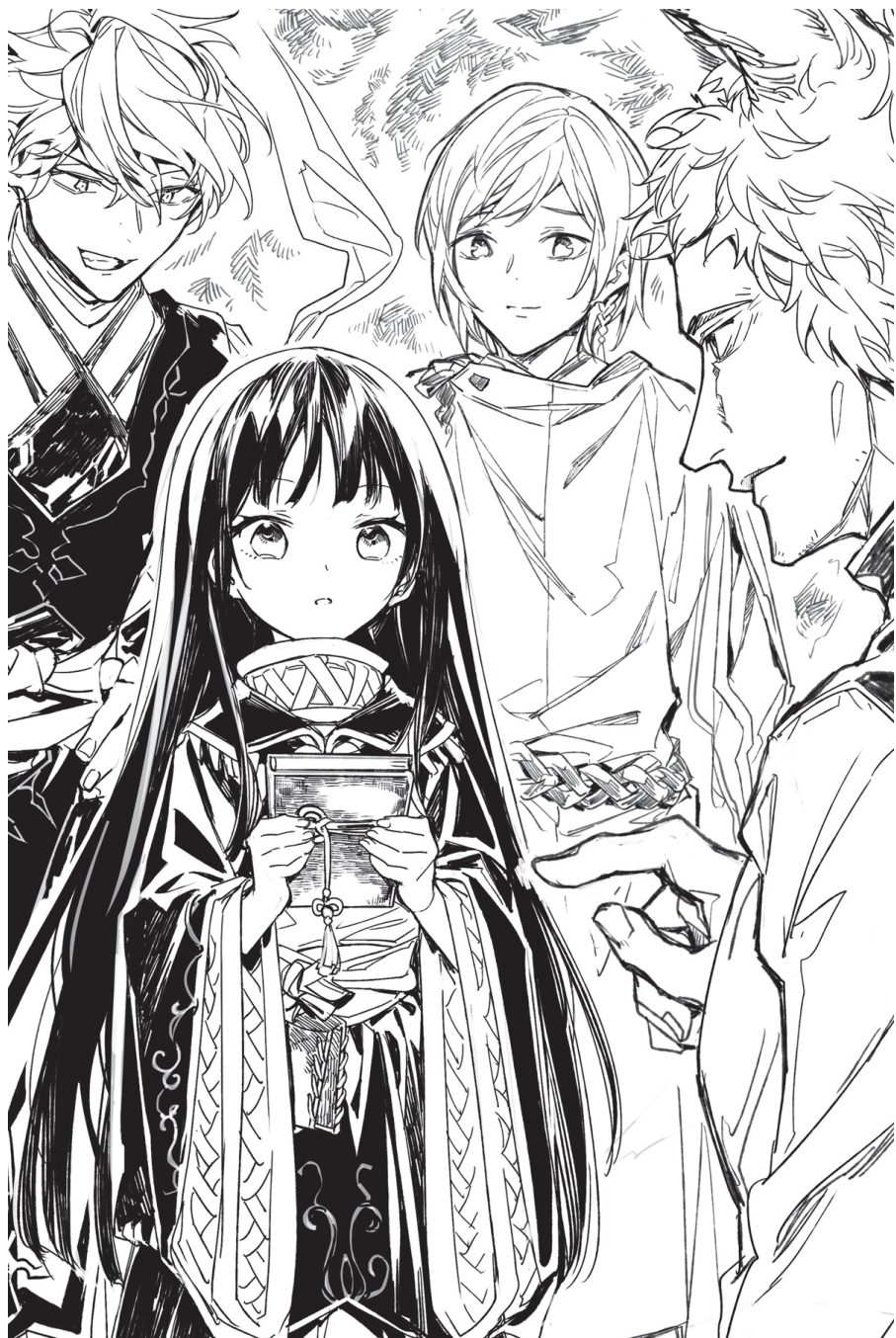
"If you don't, I might curse them..."

"That's horrible!"

Wait, what are these feelings? Please don't give me that captivating smile. I really can't handle it. Falling for a Wild-Natured man as a Natureless woman is way too rough a path for me.

"It'll be fine, Dr. Yae. Let's show those monsters what we're made of!"

Shouldn't he be saying *Let's heal the souls of the corrupted*? After all, Yae was a doctor specializing in deformation.



Afterword

Hello, and if this is our first encounter, it's nice to meet you. My name is Tamaki Itomori. Thank you very much for picking up this book.

This story includes two components that I am fond of: a Japanese aesthetic and beasts. I really like the combination of a young girl and a beast who serves her. I can remember writing about large dogs, dragons, and birds, but it occurred to me that I had never based a story around tigers, and so this tale was born. I did waver on whether I should go with lions instead. Bears are nice, too...

The main character reincarnates into a world with an ancient vibe but a quality of living closer to, though a little above, Japan's Sengoku period. She possesses a degree of mental maturity because she has retained her memories from her past life, but her mind is held back by her current physical age. This resulted in a protagonist who often overthinks things.

She becomes a doctor in the new world, but the fantasy setting means that her medical practice is completely different from reality.

Now for acknowledgments.

I had a change in supervisors with this volume, and I am grateful to them both. To the supervisor who has helped me until now, thank you very much. Take care of yourself, and I pray for your success in the future.

To my new supervisor, I am looking forward to working with you. (Though I've already caused you trouble with deadlines and such!) It is an honor to have your help and advice. Please continue to give me your guidance in the future.

To Izumi, I am very happy I was able to work with you. The character designs for this book are wonderful. I was ecstatic when I

saw the rough drafts. The protagonist and Arai are so cool and beautiful! Thank you for giving my book such rich charm and expression.

To the editorial team, the designer, the proofreader, the bookstores, and everyone else who helped with the book's publishing, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you also to my family and friends.

To everyone who read the book, I hope it was a thrilling journey. May our paths cross again.

Tamaki Itomori

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WOLF & PARCHMENT, VOL. 1-6

The young man Col dreams of one day joining the holy clergy and departs on a journey from the bathhouse, Spice and Wolf. Winifred Kingdom's prince has invited him to help correct the sins of the Church. But as his travels begin, Col discovers in his luggage a young girl with a wolf's ears and tail named Myuri who stowed away for the ride!

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86—EIGHTY-SIX, VOL. 1-10

In truth, there is no such thing as a bloodless war. Beyond the fortified walls protecting the eighty-five Republic Sectors lies the "nonexistent" Eighty-Sixth Sector. The young men and women of this forsaken land are branded the Eighty-Six and, stripped of their humanity, pilot "unmanned" weapons into battle...

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E-rank hunter Jinwoo Sung has no money, no talent, and no prospects to speak of—and apparently, no luck, either! When he enters a hidden double dungeon one fateful day, he's abandoned by his party and left to die at the hands of some of the most horrific monsters he's ever encountered.

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THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL, VOL. 1-10

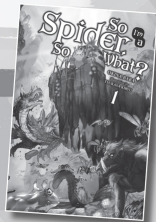
Reborn as a destitute orphaned girl with nothing to her name but memories of a previous life, Tanya will do whatever it takes to survive, even if it means living life behind the barrel of a gun!

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SO I'M A SPIDER, SO WHAT?, VOL. 1-14

I used to be a normal high school girl, but in the blink of an eye, I woke up in a place I've never seen before and—and I was reborn as a spider?!

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OVERLORD, VOL. 1-14

When Momonga logs in one last time just to be there when the servers go dark, something happens—and suddenly, fantasy is reality. A rogues' gallery of fanatically devoted NPCs is ready to obey his every order, but the world Momonga now inhabits is not the one he remembers.

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